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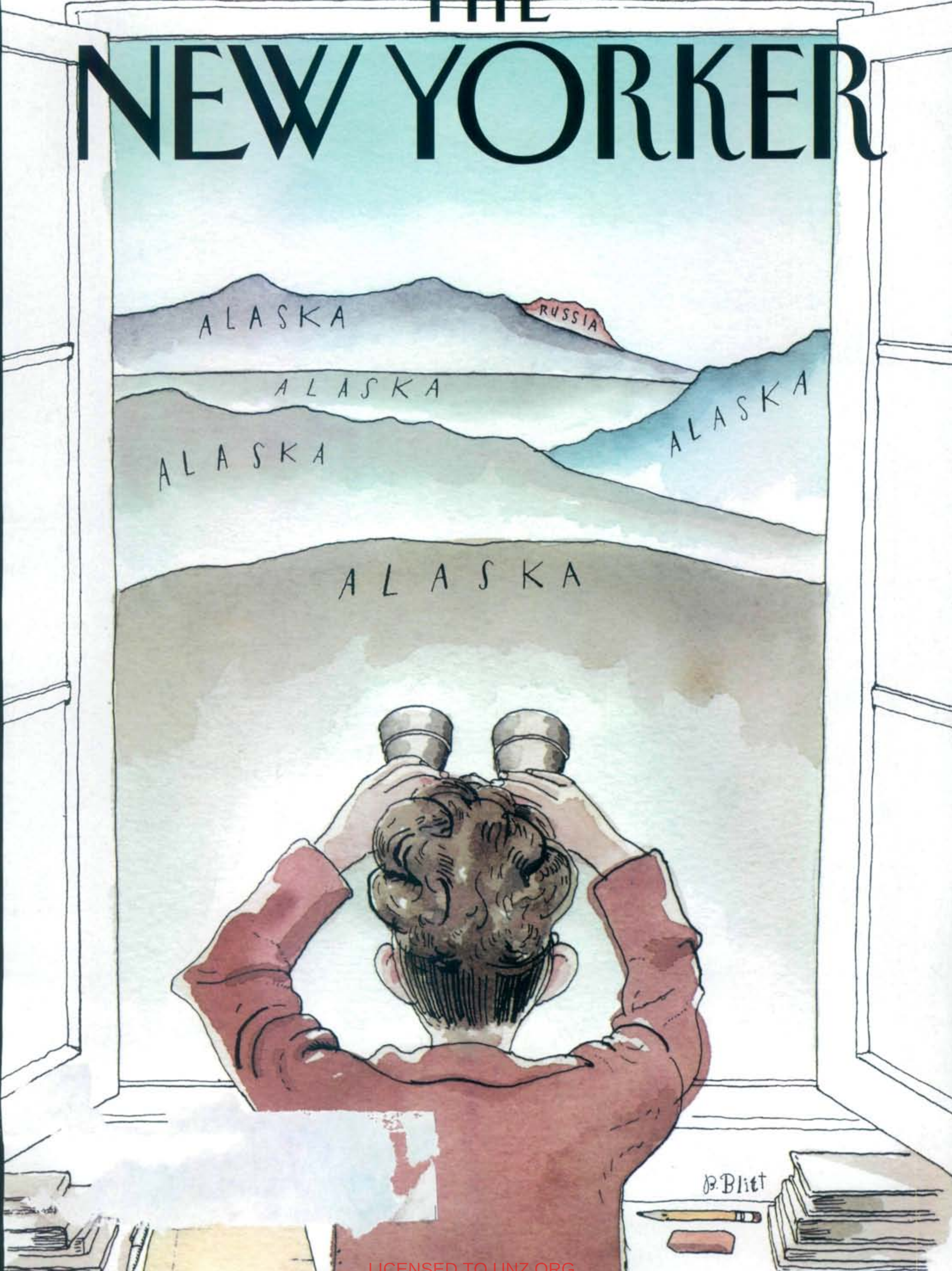
THE NEW YORKER

OCT. 6, 2008



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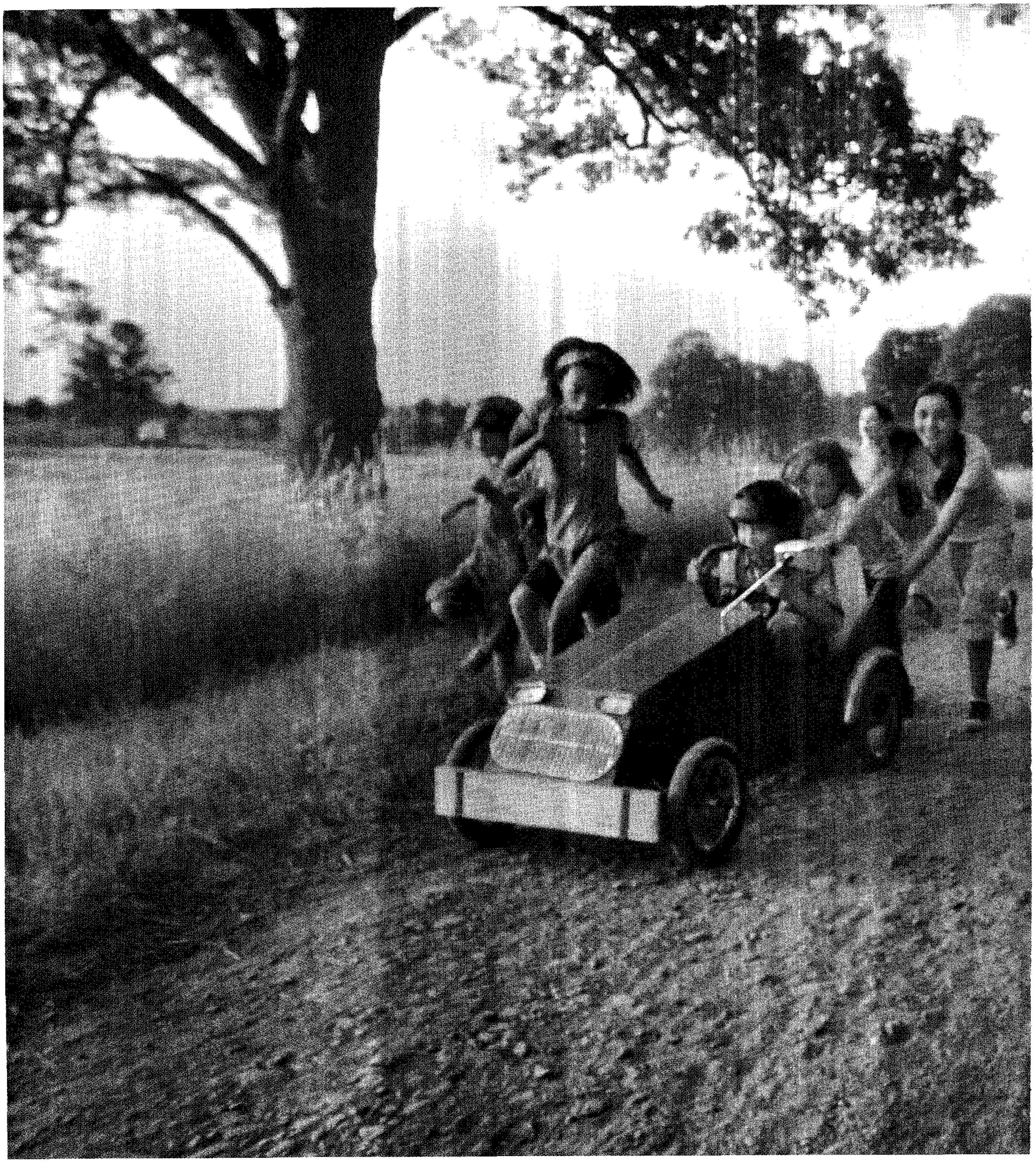

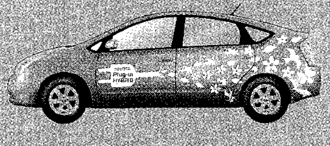

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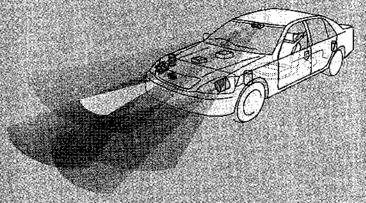

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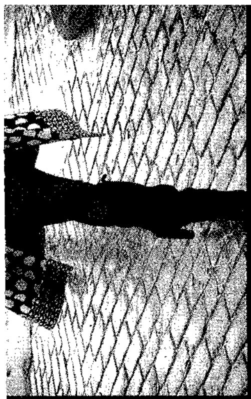

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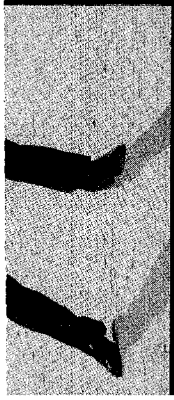

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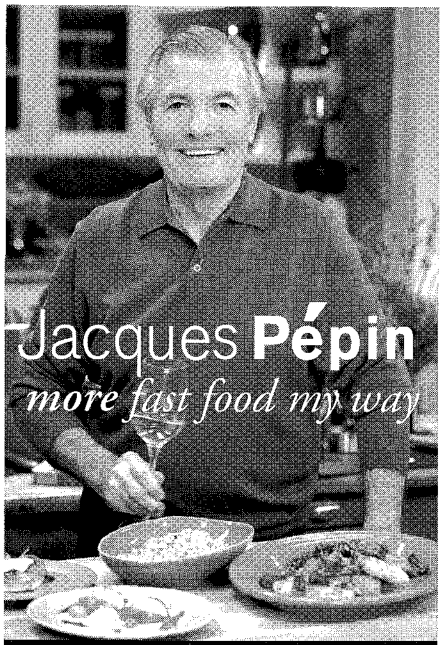
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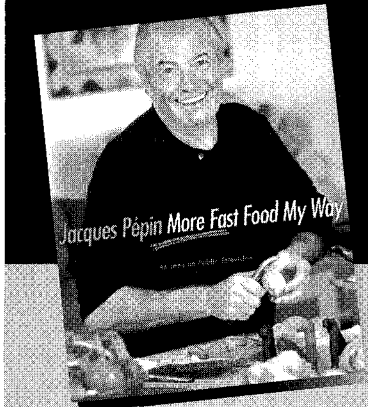

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THE NEW YORKER

OCTOBER 6, 2008

8 GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN
31 THE TALK OF THE TOWN
John Cassidy on the financial crisis; a Goldman alumni gathering; Palin tans.

Peter J. Boyer 36 THE POLITICAL SCENE
The Appalachian Problem
How Obama should woo Virginians.

Calvin Tomkins 42 PROFILES
The Artist of the Portrait
Elizabeth Peyton's face paintings.

Norman Mailer 50 LIFE AND LETTERS
In the Ring
Letters of sixty years.

Raffi Khatchadourian 64 A REPORTER AT LARGE
The Stolen Forests
The global war on illegal logging.

Daniel Alarcón 74 FICTION
"The Idiot President"

THE CRITICS

Sasha Frere-Jones 82 POP MUSIC
Timbaland and his new collaborator.

Adam Gopnik 85 A CRITIC AT LARGE
Richard Reeves's "John Stuart Mill."

91 BOOKS
Briefly Noted

John Lahr 92 THE THEATRE
"Passion Play," "Equus."

Anthony Lane 94 THE CURRENT CINEMA
"Blindness," "Rachel Getting Married."

POEMS

Anne Carson 59 "Tag"
Rosanna Warren 78 "Romanesque"

COVER *"A Room with a View," by Barry Blitt* DRAWINGS *Charles Barsotti, William Hamilton, Tom Cheney, Drew Dernavich, Frank Cotham, Robert Mankoff, Leo Cullum, Christopher Weyant, David Sipress, Barbara Smaller, P. C. Vey* SPOTS *Benoît Jacques*

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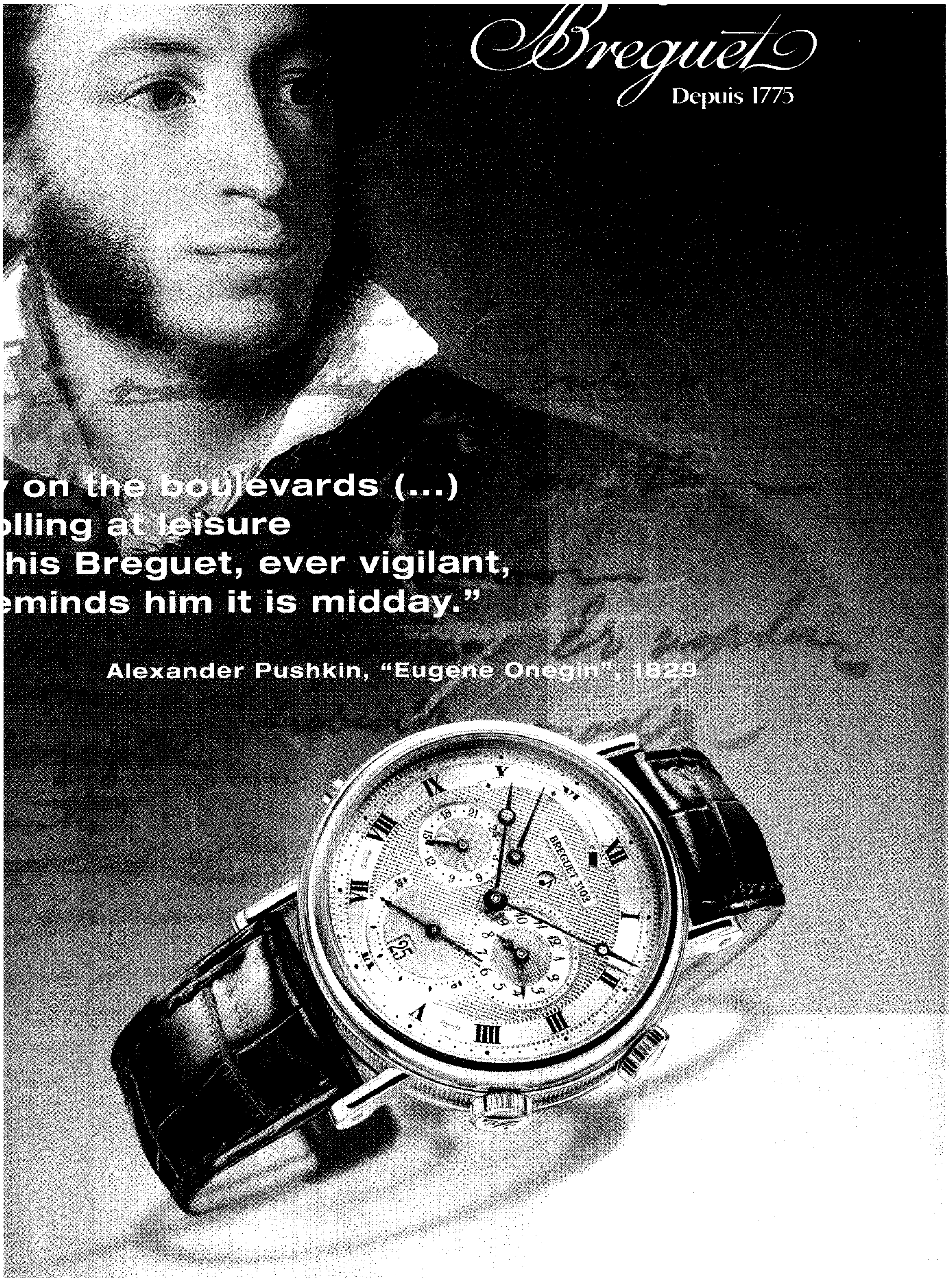
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Alexander Pushkin, “Eugene Onegin”, 1829

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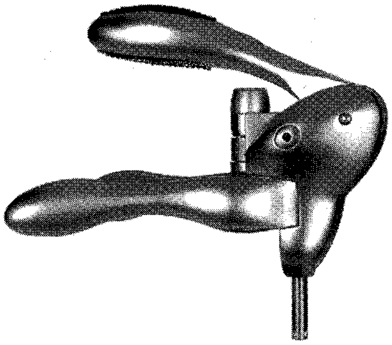

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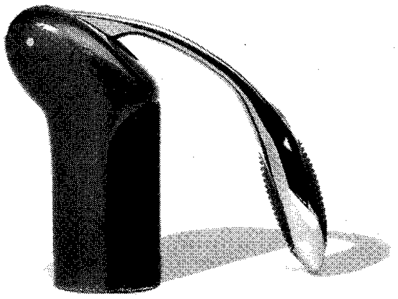

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CONTRIBUTORS

Peter J. Boyer ("The Appalachian Problem," p. 36) is a *New Yorker* staff writer.

John Cassidy (Comment, p. 31), the author of "Dot.Con," is working on a book entitled "How Markets Think."

Steven Kurutz (The Talk of the Town, p. 33) writes for the *Times*. His book "Like a Rolling Stone: The Strange Life of a Tribute Band" was published in April.

Calvin Tomkins ("The Artist of the Portrait," p. 42) covers art and cultural affairs for the magazine. His new book, "Lives of the Artists," comes out next month.

Norman Mailer ("In the Ring," p. 50), who died last year, published more than thirty books and won a Pulitzer Prize for both "The Armies of the Night" and "The Executioner's Song." "America," a combination of text by Mailer and photographs by a number of noted photographers, will be published in the fall of 2009. Michael Lennon archived some fifty thousand of Mailer's letters over a seven-year period and, with Mailer, edited the letters presented here.

Anne Carson (Poem, p. 59) is a poet and essayist. Her book "An Oresteia" will be published in March.

Raffi Khatchadourian ("The Stolen Forests," p. 64) is a staff writer.

Daniel Alarcón (Fiction, p. 74) is the author of "Lost City Radio," a novel, which is out in paperback.

Rosanna Warren (Poem, p. 78) is a fellow at the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library. Her collection of literary criticism, "Fables of the Self: Studies in Lyric Poetry," has just been published.

Adam Gopnik (A Critic at Large, p. 85) has written several books, including "Through the Children's Gate: A Home in New York" and "Angels and Ages," which will be published in January.

John Lahr (The Theatre, p. 92), the magazine's senior drama critic and the author of "Honky Tonk Parade," is writing a biography of Tennessee Williams.

Anthony Lane (The Current Cinema, p. 94) is a staff writer and a film critic for the magazine. "Nobody's Perfect" is a collection of his *New Yorker* reviews and profiles.

Barry Blitt (Cover), a regular contributor of cover art, is working on illustrations for a children's book, "What's the Weather Inside?"

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

A New Yorker Festival blog. / Video: A look at the illegal-logging trade, plus *Raffi Khatchadourian* takes readers' questions. / The Campaign Trail podcast, hosted by *Dorothy Wickenden*. / The Naked Campaign videos, featuring *Steve Brodner*. / Works by Elizabeth Peyton. / The Book Bench, the Cartoon Lounge, Goings On, plus blogs by *Hendrik Hertzberg*, *Steve Coll*, and *Sasha Frere-Jones*. / From the archives: *Lillian Ross* and *Louis Menand* on Norman Mailer, and thousands of movie reviews. / Animated cartoons, the caption contest, and a list of *New Yorker* events.

THE MAIL

VOTING BY FAITH

Peter J. Boyer's wide-ranging analysis of the intersection of religion and politics focusses on the alliance between some high-profile, ultra-conservative Catholics and "the Rove religious machine," and the apparent affinity these Catholics have for the Republican Party ("Party Faithful," September 8th). These, of course, are only a slice of the Catholic-voter pie. There is a wide spectrum of Catholic thought on all the issues that voters consider. While there is great unanimity among Catholics about the need to protect and respect all human life, there are diverse opinions on how best to do so. Many Catholics—including those frequently in the pews—are not comfortable with Republican Party policies. Instead, they are welcoming to immigrants and loath to support preëmptive warfare, and they are much more likely to concern themselves with "the social gospel" than they are to join the bigoted campaigns that often seem to drive the movement to ban gay marriage. It can't be denied that Karl Rove's machine earned a bloc of Catholic votes for his party in 2004, but there is a lot more on the minds of Catholic voters than Rove will ever be able to understand.

Kathlin Fisher
Green Bay, Wis.

Boyer offers an insightful analysis of the tactical strategies employed by Karl Rove and Deal Hudson to draw Catholics and other religious voters into the Republican Party. It's a cautionary tale about the selling out of faith to narrow partisan agendas, and the perils of utilizing religion to win elections rather than to constructively inform our values and commitment to the common good. While George W. Bush hit many of the right notes with Catholics on the campaign trail, his Administration has made a mockery of Catholic social teaching. Preëmptive war, contempt for international diplomacy, a reckless disregard for environmental stewardship, and economic policies that leave the poor farther behind are not consistent with building a culture of life. Political operatives who use faith as a blunt partisan tool stoke the flames of America's culture wars and undermine common-ground efforts to address profound moral and political challenges. Democrats should be cautious not to follow the lead of Republicans by confusing the proper role of faith in public life with a utilitarian power grab for electoral advantage. Americans are hungry for a much richer conversation about religion's essential role in renewing our nation's commitment to justice, peace, and the common good.

Alexia Kelley
Executive Director, Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good
Washington, D.C.

COMMON CAUSE

James Surowiecki writes that "the commons leads to overuse and destruction; the anticommons leads to underuse and waste" (The Financial Page, August 11th & 18th). In fact, countless communities around the world sustainably manage natural resources—fisheries, timber, fresh water, wildlife—without succumbing to the "tragedy of the commons." On the Internet, too, communities from Wikipedia to open-source software to Flickr allow individuals to come together to coöperate and share without resorting to contracts, cash, or other market mechanisms. It's time for economists to shed their orthodoxies and wake up to the reality that the commons is a highly robust and growing sector for managing resources and creating value.

David Bollier
Editor, OntheCommons.org
Amherst, Mass.

•

Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to themail@newyorker.com. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. All letters become the property of The New Yorker and will not be returned; we regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.

THE GIRL WITH THE DRAGON TATTOO

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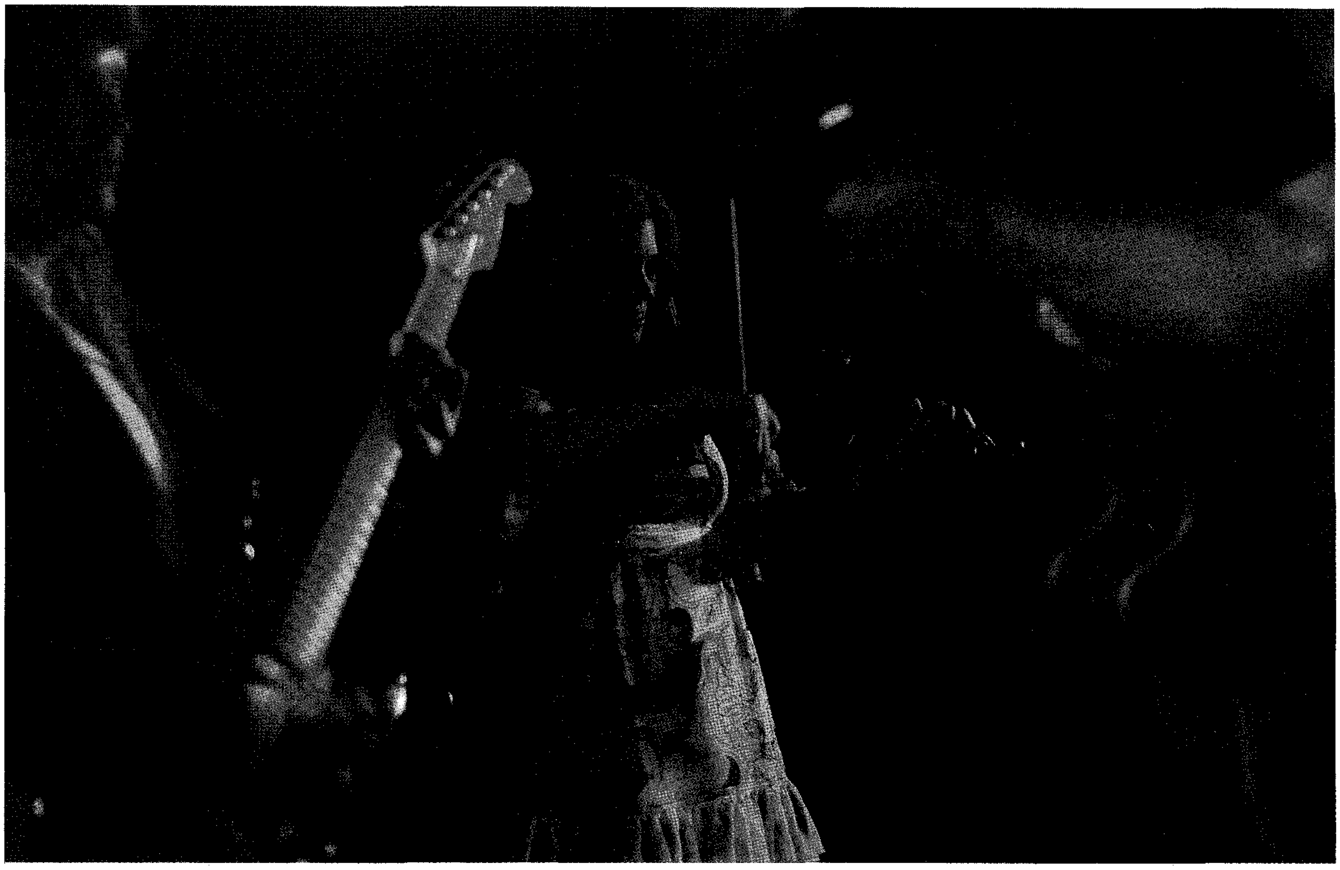

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

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THIS WEEK

THE THEATRE
FOOLS FOR LOVE

John Patrick Shanley ("Doubt") teams up with the composer Henry Krieger ("Dreamgirls") for "Romantic Poetry," a new musical at Manhattan Theatre Club, featuring a pair of intertwined love stories set in New York City. Shanley also directs. (See page 10.)

NIGHT LIFE
LIKE A HURRICANE

When the country vocalist and songwriter Lucinda Williams first rose to prominence, in the eighties, she was known for being meticulous: she would sometimes take years between releasing albums. As she's aged, her pace has accelerated. On the heels of last year's melancholic "West" comes a fiery new album, "Little Honey." Williams also has a protest EP of cover songs in the works and a show at the WaMu Theatre at Madison Square Garden this week. (See page 14.)

ART
DYNAMIC DUO

The British artists Gilbert & George—best known for brightly colored photograph-and-text pieces that touch on themes of sex, faith, and death—have been collaborating for more than four decades. The Brooklyn Museum exhibits some ninety of the pair's works. (See page 16.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
SUITE ITALIENNE

In "Au Commencement, Monteverdi," the cellist Sonia Wieder-Atherton interweaves music by the innovative Venetian master with powerful contemporary works in a casual concert at Le Skyroom, the French Institute Alliance Française's intimate rooftop space. (See page 21.)

MOVIES
OUT OF AFRICA

To accompany a run of "Delwende," the Burkina Faso director S. Pierre Yameogo's drama about the oppression of women in a traditional village, MOMA presents related works by African filmmakers, including Ousmane Sembene's "Borom Sarret" and "Rachida," by Yamina Bachir-Chouikh, about an Algerian teacher who is victimized by terrorists. (See page 26.)

The fifth annual Brooklyn Country Music Festival, at Southpaw. Photograph by Yola Monakhov.

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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
SIX SHOOTERS

The compilation film "Six in Paris" ("Paris Vu Par . . ."), from 1965, screening at BAM Oct. 3-9, is a not terribly distinguished but nonetheless happy souvenir of the New Wave, when films could be thrown together casually. Six directors, three established (Jean-Luc Godard, Jean Rouch, and Claude Chabrol), one starting over (Eric Rohmer), and two newcomers (Jean-Daniel Pollet and Jean Douchet), each contributed a short film—an extended anecdote, really—set in a different Paris neighborhood. The short form forces the directors to tell stories that depend on quick reversals, mistakes, sudden betrayal. The best of them, set around the Étoile, is Rohmer's—a tense, witty exploration of the inner life of a fussy and frightened man. It's so closely observed that we suffer acutely when his peace of mind is endangered. Godard's sketch, about a young woman playing with two tough-guy metal workers, is the sexiest; Chabrol's, predictably, is the most perverse. Chabrol and his then-fiancée, Stéphane Audran, appear together as a vicious bourgeois couple endlessly fighting. Was it a nightmare premonition of their actual marriage? One can only ask.

—David Denby

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THE THEATRE
OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

Please call the phone number listed with the theatre for timetables and ticket information.

ALL MY SONS
John Lithgow, Dianne Wiest, Patrick Wilson, and Katie Holmes star in Arthur Miller's play from 1947, about a businessman's shady dealings during the Second World War. Simon McBurney directs. In previews. (Schoenfeld, 236 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

ANN LIV YOUNG: THE BAGWELL IN ME
The Kitchen presents a performance by Ann Liv Young, based on the life of George Washington. Oct. 2-4. (512 W. 19th St. 212-255-5793, ext. 11.)

THE ATHEIST
A dark comedy written by Ronan Noone, directed by Justin Waldman and starring Campbell Scott, about an unethical reporter. Previews begin Oct. 7. (Barrow Street Theatre, 27 Barrow St. 212-352-3101.)

BILLY ELLIOT THE MUSICAL
Stephen Daldry directs the musical based on the movie, about a working-class boy who discovers a love for ballet. Elton John wrote the music, and Lee Hall wrote the book and lyrics. In previews. (Imperial, 240 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

BLASTED
Sarah Kane's first play centers on a rape in a Leeds hotel room during an unnamed war. Sarah Benson directs. Previews begin Oct. 2. (SoHo Rep, 46 Walker St. 212-352-3101.)

A BODY OF WATER
Primary Stages presents Lee Blessing's drama, about a vacationing couple who don't know where they are. Maria Mileaf directs. Starring Christine Lahti, Laura Odeh, and Michael Cristofer. Previews begin Oct. 3. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.)

BOYS' LIFE
Second Stage opens its season with Howard Korder's play from 1988, about three college friends living in New York. Michael Greif ("Rent") directs. Previews begin Oct. 2. (307 W. 43rd St. 212-246-4422.)

CLAY
A one-man coming-of-age hip-hop musical, written and performed by Matt Sax, kicks off the LCT3 initiative, presented by Lincoln Center Theatre. Previews begin Oct. 6. (The Duke on 42nd Street, 229 W. 42nd St. 646-223-3010.)

KINDNESS
Playwrights Horizons presents the première of a new play by Adam Rapp, who also directs, about a woman who takes her teen-age son to Manhattan to escape their life in Illinois. Annette O'Toole stars. In previews. (416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

THE LANGUAGE OF TREES
The world première of a play by Steven Levenson, about an American translator who goes to a war zone in the Middle East, leaving his wife and son in the hands of a friendly neighbor. Alex Timbers directs. Previews begin Oct. 4. (Roundabout Underground, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300.)

A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS
Frank Langella stars in Robert Bolt's 1961 drama about Sir Thomas More, who voiced his objections to King Henry VIII when he left the Catholic Church. Doug Hughes directs the Roundabout Theatre Company production. In previews. Opens Oct. 7. (American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300.)

OUTSIDE INN
International Culture Lab presents this murder mystery, in which a German civic engineer becomes involved in the death of his boss, written by Andreas Jungwirth and directed by Melanie Dryer. In previews. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.)

ROCK OF AGES
Chris D'Arienzo wrote this play, set in the eighties, about a young Hollywood musician who dreams of being in an arena-rock band. Kristin Hanggi directs. In previews. (New World Stages, 340 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200.)

ROMANTIC POETRY
Manhattan Theatre Club presents a new musical by John Patrick Shanley ("Moonstruck," "Doubt") and Henry Krieger ("Dreamgirls"), a romance set in Manhattan and its suburbs. In previews. (City Center, Stage I, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

THE SEAGULL
Kristin Scott Thomas, Peter Sarsgaard, Mackenzie Crook (from the British version of "The Office"), and Zoe Kazan star in Chekhov's play, in a translation by Christopher Hampton. Ian Rickson directs the Royal Court Theatre production. In previews. Opens Oct. 2. (Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200.)

SPEED-THE-PLOW
Raúl Esparza, Elisabeth Moss, and Jeremy Piven star in David Mamet's play about the dark side of the film industry. Neil Pepe directs. Previews begin Oct. 3. (Barrymore, 243 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

SPIN
The StageFARM presents a series of short plays by Adam Rapp, Gina Gionfriddo, Judith Thompson, Elizabeth Meriwether, and Mark Schultz. Alex Kilgore and Evan Cabnet direct. Previews begin Oct. 3. (Cherry Lane, 38 Commerce St. 212-239-6200.)

SUNKEN RED
Toneelhuis & Ro Theatre present a play adapted from the autobiographical novel by Jeroen Brouwers, about his time in a Japanese internment camp in Jakarta. Guy Cassiers directs, with Dirk Roofthooft. Opens Oct. 7. (BAM's Harvey Theatre, 651 Fulton St. 718-636-4100.)

13
Jason Robert Brown ("Parade") wrote the music and lyrics and Dan Elish and Robert Horn wrote the book for this musical, about a New York City teen-ager who is forced to move to Indiana with his newly divorced mother. Jeremy Sams directs. In previews. Opens Oct. 5. (Bernard B. Jacobs, 242 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

TO BE OR NOT TO BE
Nick Whitby wrote this play, based on the film of the same name, a black comedy set in Warsaw in 1939, about a theatre troupe that becomes involved in spy games during the war. Casey Nicholaw directs. The Manhattan Theatre Club production stars David Rasche, Peter Maloney, and Jan Maxwell. In previews. (Samuel J. Friedman, 261 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

NOW PLAYING

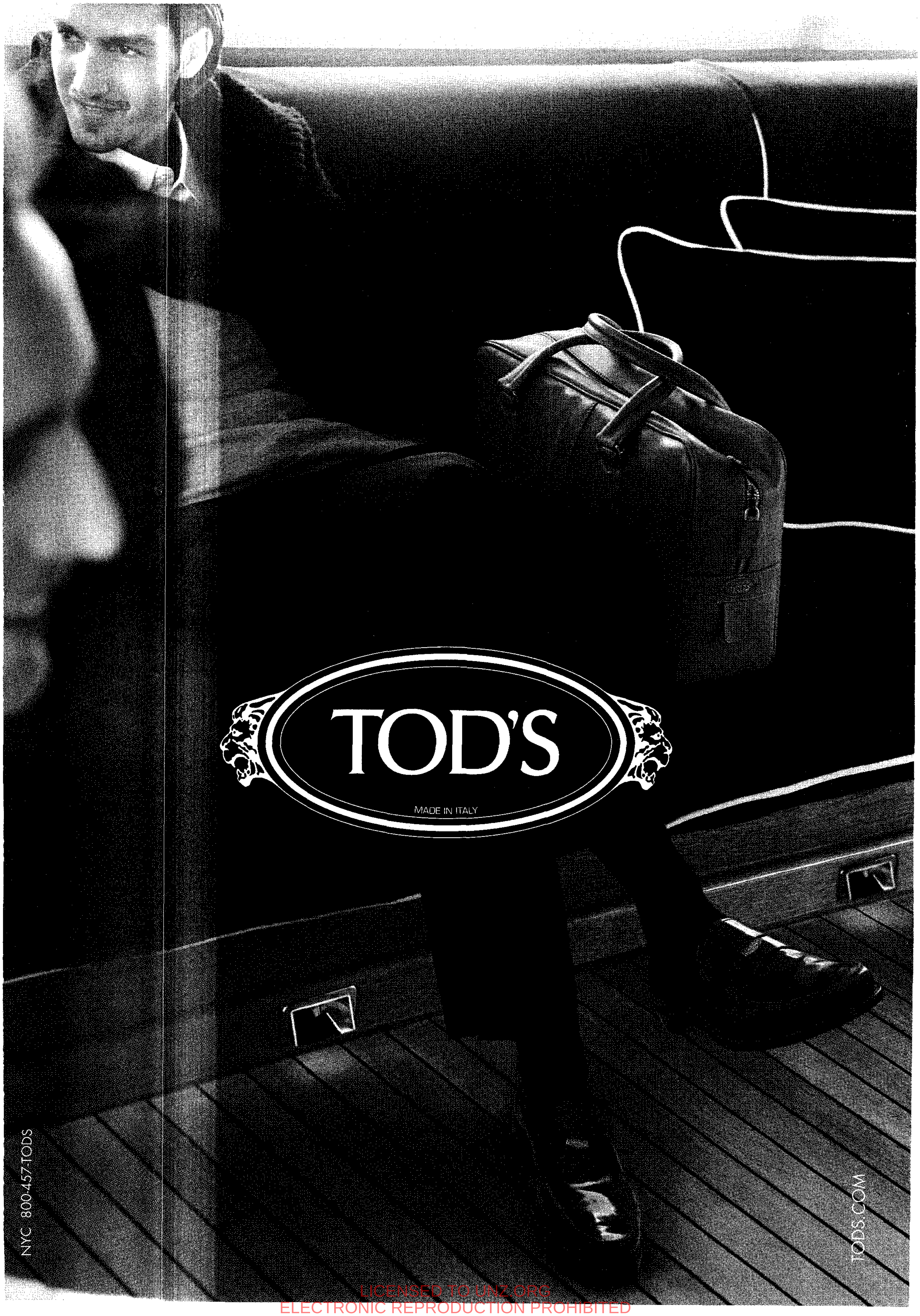
EQUUS
Daniel Radcliffe, Richard Griffiths, and Kate Mulgrew star in Peter Shaffer's 1974 drama. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Broadhurst, 235 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.)

FAULT LINES
Naked Angels presents a new play by Stephen Belber, a dark comedy about two friends on a boys' night out. Noah Emmerich and Josh Lucas star; David Schwimmer directs. (Cherry Lane, 38 Commerce St. 212-239-6200.)

FIFTY WORDS
Michael Weller wrote this play, starring Elizabeth Marvel and Norbert Leo Butz, about a crazy night in the life of a young Brooklyn family. Austin Pendleton directs the MCC Theatre production. (Lucille Lortel, 121 Christopher St. 212-279-4200.)

THE GLASS CAGE
The wealthy and sheltered McBains of Toronto, in J. B. Priestley's brilliant drama from 1957, are a smug, spoiled, straitlaced bunch, and they're certain that their three young relatives, coming to visit for the first time, will be savages, like their Indian mother, and drunkards, like their dissolute father. And they're right: the visitors are as hot and wild as fire, and they come with a plan to do great harm. In this fully relevant revival, the performances by Saxon Palmer and Jeanine Serralles, as two of the three young people, pop like bright flowers. Directed by Lou Jacob. (Mint, 311 W. 43rd St. 212-315-0231.)

IN CONFLICT
The season opener at the Culture Project comes from Temple University via the Edinburgh Fringe; the young cast brings to life interviews with Iraq-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war veterans, adapted by Douglas C. Wager from Yvonne Latty's book. The broad range of subjects includes a Russian immigrant from Sheepshead Bay (Stan Demidoff) who lost his foot in an explosion; a Navajo veteran (Sam Paul) unable to get treatment for P.T.S.D. at his reservation; a student (Amanda Holston) who enlisted for tuition aid and wound up in Iraq; a traumatized Army private from the Bronx, and a wounded marine from Avenue D, both played convincingly by Damon Williams. The show isn't artistically flawless—the quality of the monologues is uneven, and video clips of Latty weighing in on her subjects become grating—but it's worthy, compelling, and not without humor and hope. (27 Barrow St. 212-352-3101.)

A TALE OF TWO CITIES
It isn't clear who asked for a musical adaptation of Dickens's novel, but here it is—wigs, guillotines, and all. Jill Santoriello's overblown score whisks us away to another time: not the seventeen-eighties but the nineteen-eighties, when the "Les Misérables" brand of megamusical ruled. (The Act I finale, "Until Tomorrow," is a thesaurus entry away from "One Day More.") Despite the show's unerring triteness, it's based on one of the best stories ever spun, and by Act II—Revolution time—Warren Carlyle's production gains a certain momentum. James Barbour makes an alluringly arch Sydney Carton, and there are a couple of stage effects that outdo the material. Still, it's dismaying to think of Broadway as a home for gussied-up Cliffs Notes. (Hirschfeld, 302 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

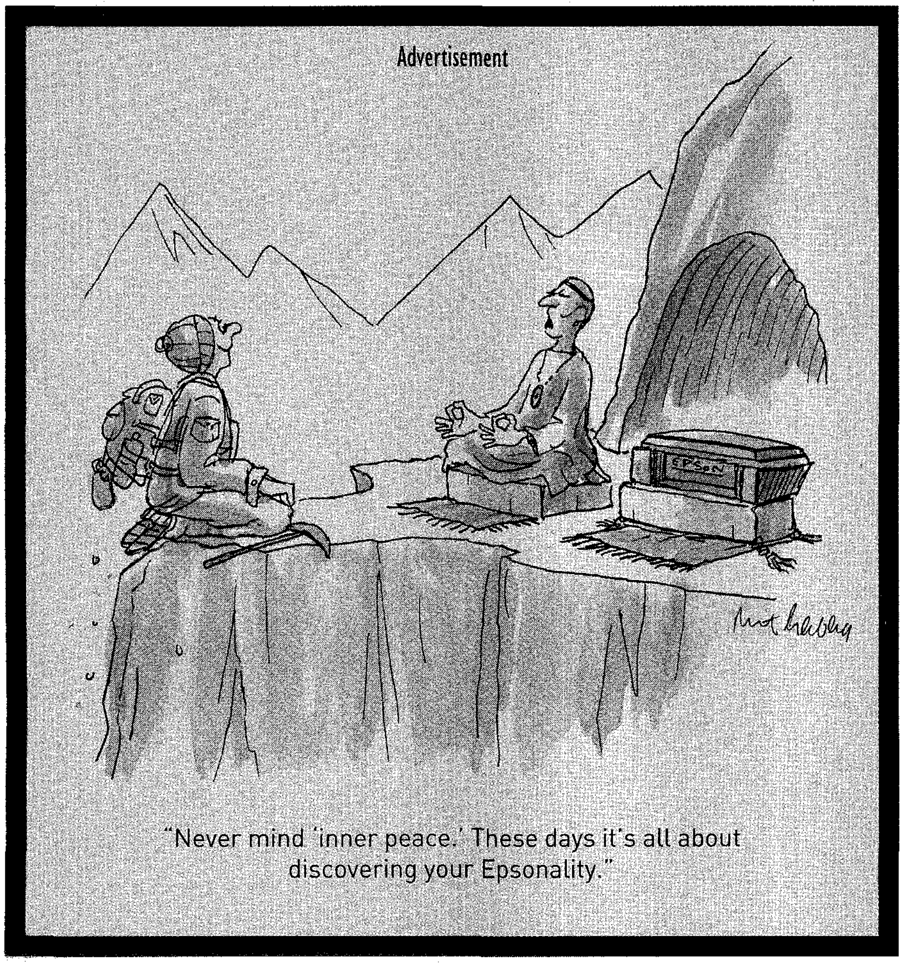
THE TEMPEST
At the start of the play (now at the Classic Stage Company, under the direction of Brian Kulick), Alonso, the king of Naples (Michael Potts), is on his way home from Tunis, where he and some members of his court, including his son and heir apparent, Ferdinand (the stellar Stark Sands), have just attended his daughter's wedding to an African. They are shipwrecked on an island, where they find Prospero (Mandy Patinkin), his daughter, Miranda (the increasingly brilliant Elisabeth Waterston), and his two familiars, a sprite named Ariel (Angel Desai) and his slave, Caliban (Nyambi Nyambi). In this production, Patinkin doesn't seem to connect with the other actors or with the text; he is isolated in the part. One suspects that he is less an actor than a monologuist, interested mostly in his song of the self. (Reviewed in our issue of 9/29/08.) (136 E. 13th St. 212-352-3101.)

WHAT'S THAT SMELL: THE MUSIC OF JACOB STERLING
David Pittu's sporadically hilarious musical satire is staged as an interview, with songs, of the self-important composer-lyricist Jacob Sterling (Pittu). His sycophantic interviewer, Leonard Swagg (delectably played by Peter Bartlett), proudly introduces his guest by saying that he's been "prominently up-and-coming for over twenty years" and is also the recipient of an I Can't Believe It's Not Butter Genius Grant. Bartlett's seriousness of feeling invests such jokes with a weird, wonderful dignity. Though too much of the humor is at the level of the show's title—there's a recurring gag about theatrical institutions with acronyms like CLOT, SPASM, and AASS—when the show aims higher and hits its mark, it's a winner. (Atlantic Stage 2, at 330 W. 16th St. 212-279-4200. Through Oct. 5.)

WIG OUT!
Erik King stars in Tarell Alvin McCraney's new play, in which two drag-queen houses duke it out. (Vineyard, 108 E. 15th St. 212-353-0303.)

Also Playing

ABSINTHE: Spiegeltent, South Street Seaport, Pier 17. 212-279-4200. **AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY:** Music Box, 239 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **AVENUE Q:** Golden, 252 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **BOEING-BOEING:** Longacre, 220 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200. **CELEBRITY AUTOBIOGRAPHY:** Triad, 158 W. 72nd St. 212-868-4444. **ENTER LAUGHING:** St. Peter's Theatre, Lexington Ave. at 54th St. 212-935-5820. **FELA!:** 37 Arts, 450 W. 37th St. 212-560-8912. Through Oct. 5. **GYPSY:** St. James, 246 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. **IN THE HEIGHTS:** Richard Rodgers, 226 W. 46th St. 212-239-6200. **LADY:** Rattlestick, 224 Waverly Pl. 212-868-4444. **SOUTH PACIFIC:** Vivian Beaumont, Lincoln Center. 212-239-6200. **SPRING AWAKENING:** Eugene O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200. **THE 39 STEPS:** Cort, 138 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200. **THREE CHANGES:** Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. Through Oct. 3. **[TITLE OF SHOW]:** Lyceum, 149 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.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NIGHT LIFE
ROCK AND POP

Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

B. B. KING BLUES CLUB & GRILL
237 W. 42nd St. (212-997-4144)—Oct. 3: **Jerry Lee Lewis,** the Killer, is still doing wonders with his pumping piano rock. Oct. 4: **Taj Mahal** is a bluesman with a well-stamped musical passport—he's incorporated reggae, jazz, gospel, R. & B., zydeco, and even Hawaiian elements into his material. He's been at it for forty years, and his latest album, "Maestro," features guest appearances by the likes of Ben Harper, Jack Johnson, Angelique Kidjo, and Ziggy Marley. Oct. 5: The death-metal band **Obituary** has been helping to define the genre since its début, in Tampa, more than two decades ago.

BLENDER THEATRE AT GRAMERCY
127 E. 23rd St. (212-307-7171)—Oct. 7: **Alison Moyet.** The seminal synth-pop duo Yaz (or Yazoo, if you're English) reunited earlier this year, returning Vince Clarke's sprightly digital rhythms and Moyet's husky singing to the spotlight. Yaz's return was greeted with great enthusiasm, but, like the original group, it was short-lived. Moyet has long had a solo career, and she recently released a new album, "The Turn," which finds her signature bluesy voice wrapped around mature and emotive material.

CARNEGIE HALL
57th St. at Seventh Ave. (212-247-7800)—Oct. 3: The Cape Verdean diva **Cesária Évora** and the Billie Holiday-esque **Madeleine Peyroux** make for an extremely promising double bill.

CUTTING ROOM
19 W. 24th St. (212-691-1900)—The French singer **Emilie Simon** favors layered songs that often incorporate unusual instrumentation; for a song on the soundtrack of the original French release of "March of the Penguins," she clicked ice cubes together to create a beat. Her work has been somewhat difficult to find—her sole U.S. release is "The Flower Book," from 2006. She's at this Flatiron club on Wednesdays through Oct. 29.

FILLMORE NEW YORK AT IRVING PLAZA
17 Irving Pl., at 15th St. (212-777-6800)—Oct. 2-4: The cocktail-ready electronica of **Stereolab.** Oct. 5: In the early nineties, Brooklyn's **Biohazard** deftly combined the then-disparate genres of hardcore, heavy metal, and hip-hop into a relentlessly aggressive mix, but they remained less well-known than Anthrax, a band with a similar approach. Biohazard is celebrating its twentieth anniversary by returning to its original lineup.

GRAND BALLROOM
Manhattan Center, 311 W. 34th St. (212-307-7171)—Oct. 4: The **Fleet Foxes** formed in Seattle a few years ago, but their sound is timeless—a sweet, harmony-driven folk-rock confection not heard since the heyday of the Beach Boys and Crosby, Stills, and Nash. Those sixties groups are obvious touchstones—the band members admit as much in interviews—but the music is fresh.

HIGHLINE BALLROOM
431 W. 16th St. (212-414-5994)—Oct. 1: Robert Pollard, who gained fame in the indie-rock

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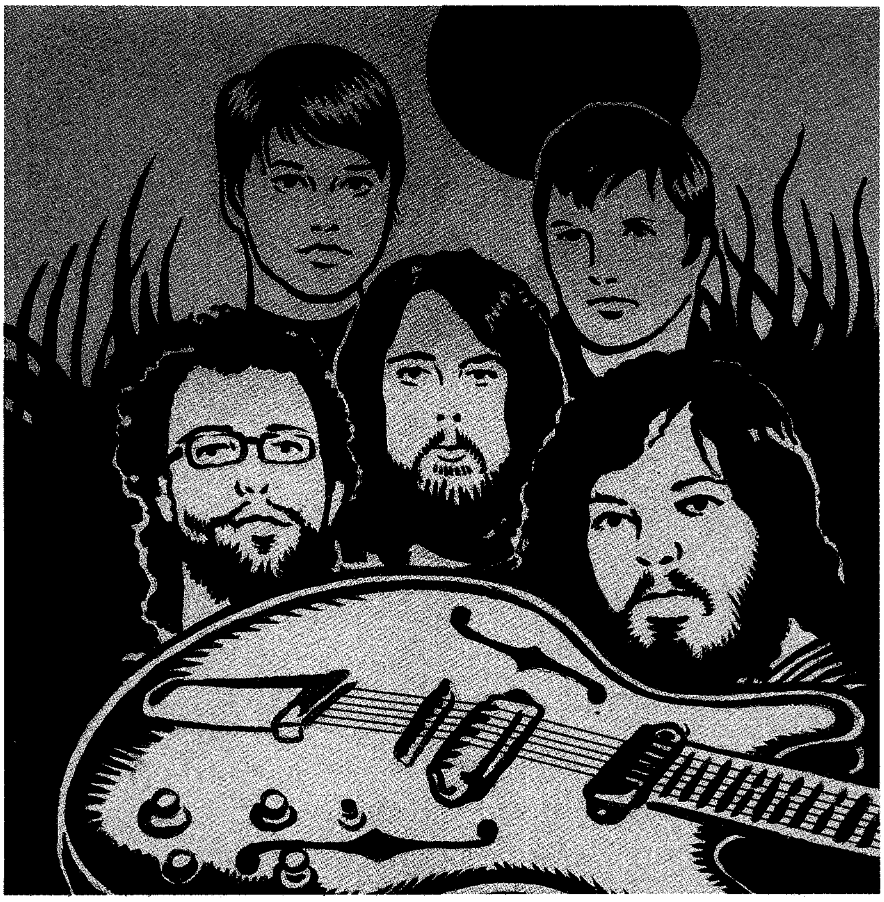
scene as the leader of Guided by Voices, swings by with his new band, **Boston Spaceships.** Oct. 4: The **Subdudes,** a New Orleans-based R. &. B.-and-rock ensemble with a reputation for sensational live shows, unplug for an acoustic set.

KNITTING FACTORY

74 Leonard St., between Broadway and Church St. (212-219-3132)—Oct. 3: **Baby Dee,** a Cleveland-based singer, harpist, pianist, accordionist, and songwriter who mixes carnivalesque performance antics with moments of heart-wrenching intensity. Her wonderfully eccentric recent release "Safe Inside the Day," which was co-produced by Matt Sweeney and Will Oldham, consists mostly of lighthearted songs fleshed out by elegant woodwinds and strings. The lyrics cover a wide variety of subjects, including Catholic hagiography, stalwart albinos, and her father's crowbar collection.



The Fleet Foxes slip into town for a show at the Manhattan Center's Grand Ballroom.

ROBERT PIERSANTI

MADISON SQUARE GARDEN

Seventh Ave. at 33rd St. (212-307-7171)—Oct. 6-7 and Oct. 11-12: **Madonna.** The world may know she's fifty, but does she?

MERCURY LOUNGE

217 E. Houston St. (212-260-4700)—Oct. 1: The power pop of the **XYZ Affair.** Oct. 4: **Glasvegas** (see Radio City Music Hall). With the hot and saucy vocalist **Angela McCluskey,** a co-founder of the Los Angeles favorites the Wild Colonials.

RADIO CITY MUSIC HALL

Sixth Ave. at 50th St. (212-247-4777)—Oct. 1: **Echo and the Bunnymen,** who specialize in abstract melodramatic pop, are regarded as post-punk royalty at home in the U.K., but they've achieved little more than cult status here. This tour finds the band revisiting its signature 1984 opus, "Ocean Rain," in its windswept entirety, backed by a full orchestra. Scotland's cockily insouciant **Glasvegas** open the proceedings.

TERMINAL 5

610 W. 56th St. (212-582-6600)—Sept. 30 and Oct. 1: The piano whiz kid **Ben Folds,** who recently reunited his group Ben Folds Five for a benefit show in Chapel Hill, continues his solo career. His new album, "Way to Normal," features a winsome duet with the singer Regina Spektor, "You Don't Know Me."

WAMU THEATRE AT MADISON SQUARE GARDEN

Seventh Ave. at 33rd St. (212-307-7171)—Oct. 3: **Lucinda Williams,** a native of Lake Charles, Louisiana, sings with an aching grittiness in a wide range of styles, primarily country-rock, but she's not afraid to broaden her horizons. Her latest release, "Little Honey," includes a grinding cover of AC/DC's "It's a Long Way to the Top."

WEBSTER HALL

125 E. 11th St. (212-353-1600)—Oct. 1: The **Black Kids,** from Jacksonville, Florida, are the siblings Reggie and Ali Youngblood and their friends Dawn Watley, Owen Holmes, and Kevin Snow. The Kids parlayed substantial Internet buzz into a contract with Columbia Records; their début album of New Wave-inflected pop, "Partie Traumatic," came out at the start of the summer. Oct. 4: **Shudder to Think.** Blessed with distinctive and virtually elastic vocal chords, Craig Wedren almost won this Washington, D.C., post-hardcore band mainstream success in the mid-nineties before a diagnosis of Hodgkin's disease interrupted his momentum. Following Wedren's recovery, the band has reconvened.

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

ALGONQUIN HOTEL

59 W. 44th St. (212-840-6800)—Through Oct. 11: The vocalist **KT Sullivan** targets the enduring work of Jerome Kern.

BIRDLAND

315 W. 44th St. (212-581-3080)—Oct. 1-4: The **Lou Donaldson** quartet. The inimitable alto saxophonist Donaldson delivers a high-style blend of authentic bop and good-time R. & B. His frequent partner, the Hammond organ master **Dr. Lonnie Smith,** joins him.

BLUE NOTE

131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (212-475-8592)—Sept. 30-Oct. 5: Classic Brazilian songs are always rendered more beautifully by small groups in intimate settings, and that's just the case here as the guitarist **Romero Lubambo** performs duets with the marvellous singer **Gal Costa.**

CAFÉ CARLYLE

Carlyle Hotel, Madison Ave. at 76th St. (212-744-1600)—Through Nov. 1: The talented and genial guitarist and singer **John Pizzarelli** shares the stage with his wife, **Jessica Molaskey,** an engaging vocalist and witty foil.

DIZZY'S CLUB COCA-COLA

Broadway at 60th St. (212-258-9595)—Oct. 2-5: The pianist **Joanne Brackeen's** ear for high-profile talent is on full display in this all-star quintet; it includes the trumpeter **Randy Brecker,** the saxophonist **Greg Osby,** and the bassist **Eddie Gomez.**

FEINSTEIN'S AT LOEWS REGENCY

540 Park Ave., at 61st St. (212-339-4095)—Through Oct. 4: The pride of Long Island, **Nikki Blonsky.** Continuing her adventures in pluck, the nineteen-year-old, who became a star thanks to her role in the recent movie version of "Hairspray," storms the cabaret circuit.

IRIDIUM

1650 Broadway, at 51st St. (212-582-2121)—Oct. 3-5: **Jimmy Scott** and the Jazz Expressions. The octogenarian Scott has a lifetime of turbulent ups and downs at his disposal, and they give weight to his penetrating readings of standards. Mondays belong to the electric-guitar innovator **Les Paul.**

JAZZ STANDARD

116 E. 27th St. (212-576-2232)—Oct. 2-5: **Antonio Sanchez's** Migration quartet, a stripped-down but potent ensemble, features the in-demand drummer alongside the alto saxophonist **Miguel Zenon,** the bassist **Scott Colley,** and the tenor saxophonist **David Sanchez** (no relation). Oct. 6-7: Nearly a quarter century after the death of Charles Mingus, the celebratory **Mingus Dynasty** band continues to breathe new life into the legendary bassist's compositions. The personnel fluctuates, but it is nearly always eager, young, and capable.

JOE'S PUB

425 Lafayette St. (212-539-8777)—Oct. 6-7: The vocalist **Judy Kuhn** celebrates the late Laura Nyro, the still woefully underrated Bronx-born singer-songwriter.

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART

150 W. 17th St. (212-620-5000, ext. 344)—Three veterans with deep experience in both mainstream and free jazz—the saxophonist **Oliver Lake,** the bassist **Reggie Workman,** and the drummer **Andrew Cyrille**—gather on Oct. 3.

VILLAGE VANGUARD

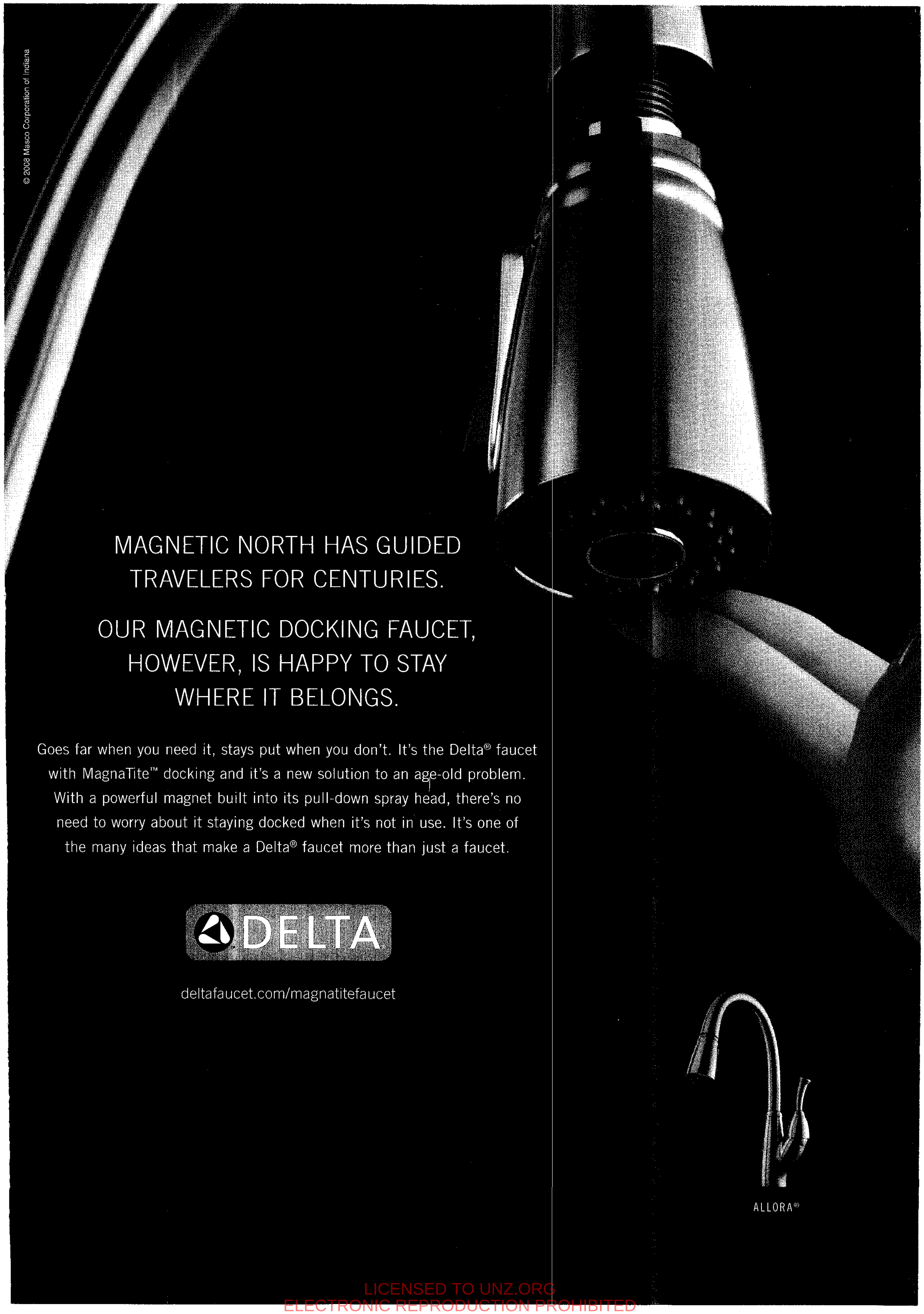
178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (212-255-4037)—Sept. 30-Oct. 5: **Bill McHenry,** one of the most spirited and lyrical of the younger saxophonists crowding the scene, is joined by the alto saxophonist **Andrew D'Angelo,** the trumpeter **Duane Eubanks,** the bassist **Ben Street,** and McHenry's occasional employer, the acclaimed drummer **Paul Motian.** The **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** holds sway on Mondays.

ART

MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM

Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (212-535-7710)—**"Giorgio Morandi, 1890-1964."** The first ever American retrospective of the Italian modern master is the sleeper hit of the season. Morandi's many still-lifes, each an adventure, are unbeatably radical meditations on what can and can't happen when three dimensions are transposed into two. They provide an immersion in mysteries of painting both so timeless and so immediate that it feels like a fresh start. Through Dec. 14. ♦ **"Landscapes Clear and Radiant: The Art of Wang Hui (1632-1717)."** Through Jan. 4. ♦ **"Royal Porcelain from the Twinight Collection: 1800-1850."** Through April 19. ♦ **"Jeff Koons on the Roof."**



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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
STREET WISE

In its attempt to keep an impossibly broad and popular subject manageable, the Bronx Museum stunts and nearly smothers "Street Art, Street Life," but the sprawling exhibition's best work survives. Driven primarily by photography, video, and performance art, the show opens in the nineteen-fifties, with images by Robert Frank and William Klein, then picks up steam in the sixties, when it seemed that the whole world had taken to the streets. Garry Winogrand, Yoko Ono, Jacques de la Villeglé, Vito Acconci—the range of works is savvy and international, and this expansive world view is the exhibition's key strength. While that can't cover up weak spots (like the strictly marginal presence of graffiti art and the lifelessness of much of the performance documentation), it does provide plenty of smart and unexpected diversions. No matter how sketchy, the early works do suggest the roots of fine new pieces by David Hammons, Kimsooja, and Francis Alÿs. Because many other artists (Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Gabriel Orozco, Kim Jones) deserve a place here, think of the show as a lively, ambitious starting point for a more extensive investigation.

—*Vince Aletti*

Through Oct. 26. ♦ **"New York, N. Why?: Photographs by Rudy Burckhardt, 1937-1940."** Through Jan. 4. ♦ **"The Essential Art of African Textiles: Design Without End."** Through March 22. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9400)—**"Van Gogh and the Colors of the Night."** Through Jan. 5. ♦ **"Home Delivery: Fabricating the Modern Dwelling."** Through Oct. 20. ♦ **"Projects 88: Lucy McKenzie."** Through Dec. 1. ♦ **"Kirchner and the Berlin Street."** Through Nov. 10. ♦ **"New Photography 2008,"** MOMA's annual showcase of significant recent work, dwindles to only two entries this year—one conceptual, one "concerned"—with schizophrenic results. Josephine Meckseper, a German-born artist now based in New York, is best known for her display-case assemblages of cheap consumer products and magazine advertisements. Three of them are here, and they're subversive and irresistible in a way that Meckseper's huge "fashion" photographs and appropriated clothing-catalogue spreads can only aspire to. Mikhael Subotzky, from South Africa, is an engaged documentarian in the classic mold who has done his best work inside his country's prisons. His large, engrossing color images of the troubled community that surrounds one of them are set alongside shots of the prison's interiors, suggesting that, for black South Africans, freedom can be more perilous than captivity. Through Jan. 5. (Open Wednesdays through Mondays, 10:30 to 5:30, and Friday evenings until 8.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—**"Catherine Opie: American Photographer."** Through Jan. 7. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 10 to 5:45, and Fridays, 10 to 7:45.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (212-570-3600)—**"Paul McCarthy: Central Symmetrical Rotation Movement Three Installations, Two Films."** Through Oct. 12. ♦ **"Progress."** Through Nov. 30. (Open Wednesdays, Thursdays, and weekends, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 1 to 9.)

BROOKLYN MUSEUM
200 Eastern Parkway (718-638-5000)—**"Gilbert & George."** Opens Oct. 3. ♦ **"Jesper Just: Romantic Delusions."** Through Jan. 4. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5, and weekends, 11 to 6.)

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
Central Park W. at 79th St. (212-769-5100)—**"The Horse."** Through Jan. 4. ♦ **"Lizards and Snakes: Alive!"** Through Jan. 5. (Open daily, 10 to 5:45.)

BRONX MUSEUM OF THE ARTS
1040 Grand Concourse (718-681-6000)—**"Street Art, Street Life: From the 1950s to Now."** Through Jan. 25. (Open Thursdays through Mondays, noon to 6, and Friday evenings until 8.)

COOPER-HEWITT NATIONAL DESIGN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 91st St. (212-849-8300)—**"Wall Stories: Children's Wallpaper and Books."** Opens Oct. 3. ♦ **"Solos: Tulou/Affordable Housing for China."** Opens Oct. 3. (Open Mondays through Thursdays, 10 to 5, Fridays, 10 to 9, Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, noon to 6.)

MORGAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM
225 Madison Ave., at 36th St. (212-685-0008)—**"Drawing Babar: Early Drafts and Watercolors."** Through Jan. 4. ♦ **"Liszt in Paris: Enduring Encounters."** Through Nov. 16. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, 10:30 to 5, Fridays, 10:30 to 9, Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, 11 to 6.)

MUSEUM OF ARTS & DESIGN
2 Columbus Circle (212-299-7777)—**"Second Lives: Remixing the Ordinary."** Through Feb. 15. ♦ **"Elegant Armor: The Art of Jewelry."** Through May 31. (Open Wednesdays through Sundays, 11 to 6, and Thursday evenings until 9.)

NATIONAL ACADEMY MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-369-4880)—**"George Tooker: A Retrospective."** Opens Oct. 2. ♦ **"The Unknown Blakelock."** Opens Oct. 2. (Open Wednesdays and Thursdays, noon to 5, and Fridays through Sundays, 11 to 6.)

NEUE GALERIE
1048 Fifth Ave., at 86th St. (212-628-6200)—**"Alfred Kubin: Drawings, 1897-1909."** Through Jan. 26. (Open Thursdays, and Saturdays through Mondays, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 11 to 9.)

SCULPTURECENTER
44-19 Purves St., Long Island City (718-361-1750)—**"We Burn, We Shiver."** Through Nov. 30. ♦ **"Degrees of Remove: Landscape and Affect."** The main exhibition space has been transformed by spare interventions: Martin Boyce's spider-web-inspired network of fluorescent lights on the ceiling and Ugo Rondinone's cast-bronze fireplace installed in the wall. The real perception-bender, however, is the show in the basement, which uses texts, images, and sound to refer to landscapes, both real and imagined. Gianni Motti's found photographs of a bucolic Kosovo being bombed, Anthony Hamboussi's color photographs of an abandoned nineteenth-century Parisian tramway, and an excerpt from Luis Buñuel's film "The Phantom of Liberty" are evocatively paired with poetry, fiction, and theoretical texts by everyone from Wallace Stevens to Rosalind Krauss, which are pasted to the wall like street posters. Through Nov. 30. (Open Thursdays through Mondays, 11 to 6.)

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

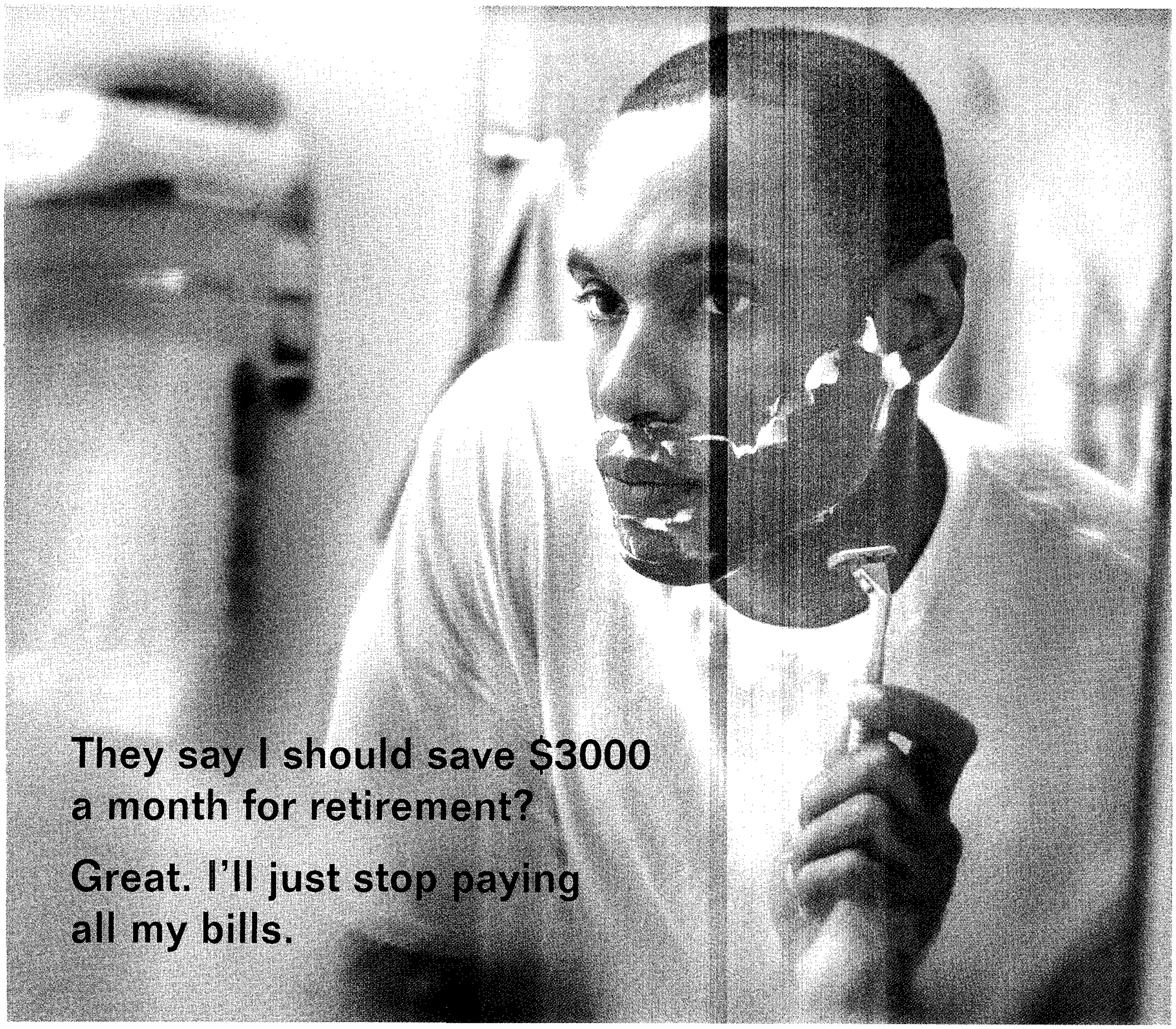
RITA ACKERMANN
The expressionistic waif-strumpet from Hungary is now forty years old, and successful, but, on the evidence of this show, she's at no short-term risk of growing up. Defiantly miscellaneous and slovenly paintings—some, as in the recent Whitney Biennial, sandwiched with collage elements between slabs of clear Plexiglas—continue to advertise punkish depravity with skulls, guns, and glued-on cigarette butts. Colors, notably certain hard-to-forget blue-greens, are hauntingly awful, apparently on purpose. There's no gainsaying Ackermann's oomph. You don't contemplate her work. You get in on it, or you get out. Through Oct. 18. (Rosen, 525 W. 24th St. 212-627-6000.)

JERONIMO ELESPE
Very small oils on aluminum panels by a young Spanish painter astonish. Elespe is a find. Landscapes, interiors, portraits, and abstract nocturnes—all painted from memory—deploy layered, tiny, sensitive strokes to peculiarly monumental effect. A brooding and delicate way with grays evokes the austere, magical gravitas of Spanish classical painting—by Velázquez, even. Elespe's portraits are especially cherishable. Self-possessed, erotically wise personages materialize from the wall, as if fresh from an indefinite past, to have a clear-eyed look around. You will want them to like you. Through Oct. 11. (Connelly, 625 W. 27th St. 212-337-9563.)

EMILY EVELETH
Eveleth's luminous paintings of jelly doughnuts, her subject for nearly two decades, maintain their creepy sensuality and metaphorical richness. Viewed at close range, the imagery dissolves into buttery abstraction, like the thighs on a Rubens nude; at a distance, flake and ooze adorn Photo-Realist Krispy Kremes. Several titles—"Unintended Consequences," "Arsenal," "Baldfaced Lie"—suggest political scenarios, and the red jelly that spills out of the pastries can evoke blood and viscera. Eveleth's canvases might seem over-freighted with meaning were they not so lusciously painted. Through Oct. 11. (Danese, 535 E. 24th St. 212-223-2227.)

KOTA EZAWA
The infamous "malice at the palace" brawl took place between the Detroit Pistons and Indiana Pacers at the Palace stadium in Auburn Hills, Michigan, in 2004. The film "Last Year at Marienbad" was released in 1961 and details an affair that may or may not have occurred at a European château. Ezawa shrewdly aligns these strange bedfellows in a pair of digital animations—the first in color, the second in black-and-white with 3-D effects—that emphasize the kinetic surprise of the basketball game and the glacial circularity of the mind game. Through Oct. 18. (Murray Guy, 453 W. 17th St. 212-463-7372.)

JASMEEN PATHEJA (BLANK NOISE), STILL FROM "MOMENTS OF A LONG PAUSE" (2008)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PAUL FEELEY

Nine heraldic abstractions in as many motifs revisit the career, cut short by death in 1966, of a founding uncle of Clement Greenbergian color-field painting. Feeley taught at Bennington College; Helen Frankenthaler was among his students. Like Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, he adopted then-newfangled oil-based enamel paints to make bright, flat stains on raw cotton duck, combining tasteful rigor with new-car éclat. Feeley's mildly lyrical panache, in quirky polyp and quatrefoil shapes and with color running to baby pinks and blues, sets him slightly apart from his sterner peers in a movement that came on like gangbusters—and fizzled. Through Oct. 25. (Matthew Marks, 523 W. 24th St. 212-243-0200.)

VIK MUNIZ

Muniz, whose work usually straddles photography and drawing, turns to sculpture in the trompe-l'oeil vein in this exhibition of what appear to be nine framed paintings set on blocks and turned to the wall. Each piece painstakingly reproduces the back of a canonical work—Picasso's "Demoiselles d'Avignon," Van Gogh's "The Starry Night," Hopper's "Nighthawks"—with every hook, supporting brace, and yellowing museum label copied from the original. A larger group of smaller pieces in the back room performs a similar feat of mimicry, this time of the stamped and collaged backs of famous news photographs. Muniz has long urged his viewers to reëxperience familiar images through his art; here, by denying us access, he brings the images vividly to mind. Through Oct. 11. (Sikkema Jenkins, 530 W. 22nd St. 212-929-2262.)

HANS SILVESTER

Like Leni Riefenstahl's controversial pictures of the Nuba, Silvester's photographs of men and women from two nomadic tribes in Southern Ethiopia treat their subjects primarily as aesthetic objects. But, in part, that's how the tribal people present themselves: they use their naked bodies as canvases for extraordinary freestyle designs finger-painted with natural pigments. One reclining figure is covered in white and ochre daisies, another with a galaxy of stars, but most of the largely headless torsos documented here are decorated with spontaneous abstractions. Silvester's work is straightforward and understated—a record of his subjects' protean, ephemeral creativity. Through Oct. 11. (Marlborough, 545 W. 25th St. 212-463-8634.)

TONY SMITH

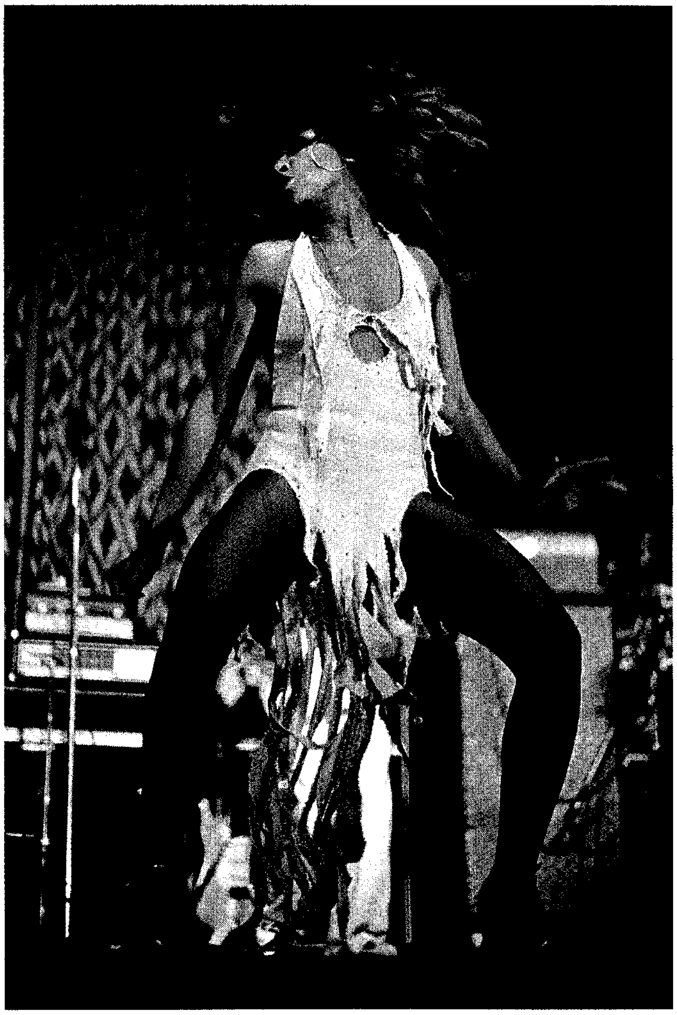
Smith (1912-80) trained as an architect, studied painting at the Art Students League, and finally made his mark as a minimalist sculptor, in the sixties. A black-and-white canvas from 1960 shows the lingering influence of Abstract Expressionism. A group of twenty charcoal drawings from the mid-fifties, arranged in a grid, suggest a giant, automatist jigsaw puzzle. Two steel sculptures painted black show Smith at his dimensional best. "New Piece" (1966) is a cube that looks as if it's been blown off-center by a gale-force wind, and "Willy" (1961), titled after a character in Samuel Beckett's "Happy Days," humanizes geometry, sending tetrahedra and octahedra sprawling, with a sense of controlled motion, across the floor. Through Oct. 25. (Marks, 522 W. 22nd St. 212-243-0200.)

SUE WILLIAMS

The choleric feminist turned elegant abstractionist recycles a motif of several years ago—paintings that are all-over orgies of cartooned body parts—but with intestinal squiggles and gory splatter in place of excited protuberances and orifices. It's all about American military atrocities and political evil, the artist avers. (A teeming abstraction in Day-Glo pink and orange conveys, it says here, that there's no meaningful difference between Republicans and Democrats.) The visual results are smashingly lovely. Grotesquerie at a uniform pitch neutralizes itself. Williams's mastery of touch and scale, in seductive color, prevails. The works get better—zestier and more electrically decorative—the longer you look. Whatever Williams thinks she's doing is fine, just so she keeps doing it. Through Oct. 25. (Zwirner, 525 W. 19th St. 212-727-2070.)

Short List

DOUG AITKEN: 303 Gallery, 547 W. 21st St. and 525 W. 22nd St. 212-255-1121. Through Nov. 1. **LOUISE BOURGEOIS:** Cheim & Read, 547 W. 25th St. 212-242-7727. Through Nov. 1. **LYNN GOLDSMITH:** Jenkins Johnson, 521 W. 26th St. 212-629-0707. Opens Oct. 2. **DAVID HARRISON:** Reich, 537A W. 23rd St. 212-924-4949. Through Oct. 18. **ROBERT INDIANA:** Kasmin, 293 Tenth Ave., at 27th St. 212-563-4474. Through Nov. 1. **MATTHEW DAY JACKSON:** Blum, 526 W. 29th St. 212-244-6055. Through Nov. 8; Klagsbrun, 526 W. 26th St. 212-243-3335. Through Oct. 18. **CHRISTIAN MARCLAY:** Cooper, 521 W. 21st St. 212-255-1105. Through Oct. 11. **MARIO MERZ:** Gladstone, 530 W. 21st St. 212-206-9300. Through Dec. 30. **ALIX PEARLSTEIN:** The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St. 212-255-5793. Through Oct. 18.



"Tina Turner Fringe, 1975," by Lynn Goldsmith, at Jenkins Johnson.

DANCE

BILL T. JONES/ARNIE ZANE DANCE COMPANY

"A Quarreling Pair" takes Jane Bowles's four-page puppet play, a cloistered study of two cohabiting sisters, and explodes it into a postmodern burlesque show. (BAM's Howard Gilman Opera House, 30 Lafayette Ave. 718-636-4100. Sept. 30 and Oct. 2-4 at 7:30.)

BALLETMET COLUMBUS

After a four-year absence, the Columbus-based ballet company presents a program of new works at the Joyce, including a piece inspired by Barack Obama's book "The Audacity of Hope," set to Mozart's "Requiem." (175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Sept. 30-Oct. 1 at 7:30, Oct. 2-3 at 8, Oct. 4 at 2 and 8, and Oct. 5 at 2.)

MORPHOSES/THE WHEELDON COMPANY

Christopher Wheeldon's promising young troupe returns for its second City Center season. The starry lineup of dancers, which includes Wendy Whelan, Maria Kowroski, and Gonzalo Garcia (all from New York City Ballet) as well as Leanne Benjamin and Edward Watson (from the Royal Ballet), will perform two mixed bills. Highlights include Wheeldon's newest ballet, "Commedia," an octet set to Stravinsky's Pulcinella Suite; two works by the British choreographer Sir Frederick Ashton (a pas de deux from "The Dream" and the gorgeous Satie-inspired "Monotones II"); the clever "Shutters Shut," set to a poem by Gertrude Stein, by Lightfoot Leon; and "Six Fold Illuminate," a new ballet by Emily Molnar, a veteran of William Forsythe's Frankfurt Ballet. (131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. Oct. 1 at 7, Oct. 2-3 at 8, Oct. 4 at 2 and 8, and Oct. 5 at 3.)

LAR LUBOVITCH DANCE COMPANY

For the first part of its fortieth anniversary season, to be followed by a more career-spanning retrospective at City Center in November, the company concentrates on Lubovitch's pioneering use of Steve Reich and Philip Glass. Besides their close attention to slow-shifting minimalist patterns, "Marimba" (1976), "North Star" (1978), and "Cavalcade" (1980) shared a communal, countercultural aesthetic. Windblown, heads tossed back, the original dancers executed intricate daisy chains as if they had been cast in "Hair." It should be interesting to see how a different generation of dancers handles the material. (219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. Oct. 1-4 at 7:30.)

"RAPTURE"

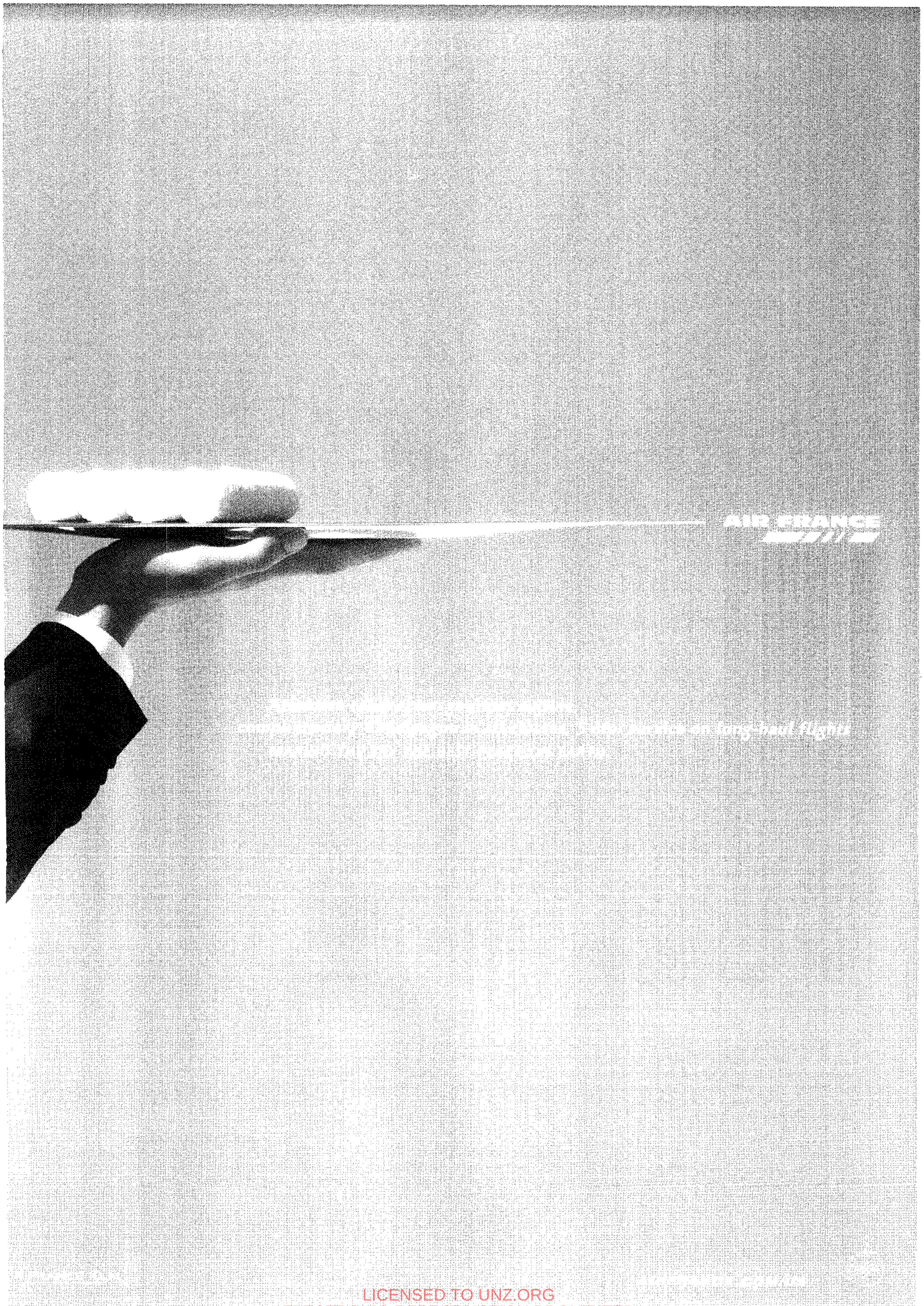
The choreographer Noémie Lafrance has set her newest work along the sinuous surfaces of Bard College's sumptuous Fisher Center (designed by Frank Gehry). (Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y. 845-758-7900. Oct. 2-5 at 7.)

DV8 PHYSICAL THEATRE

The acclaimed British ensemble hasn't made it to these shores in fifteen years, and this time around, the closest they get to New York is New Jersey. Montclair State University's go-getting Peak Performances series presents Lloyd Newson's "To Be Straight with You," a frank look at contemporary homophobia and its ties to religion. Aided by DV8's trademark multimedia sophistication, nine actor-dancers physicalize verbatim testimony drawn from interviews with eighty-five Britons, conveying the grim tales in some inventive and affecting ways. (Alexander Kasser Theatre, Montclair, N.J. 973-655-5112. Oct. 2-3 at 7:30, Oct. 4 at 8, and Oct. 5 at 3.)

LAWRENCE GOLDHUBER/BIGMANARTS

From the extra-large choreographer comes "Sleeping Giant," an allegory about the rise and fall of the American Dream. Based on a gallery installation by the graphic novelist Daniel Duford, the show tracks the mythical birth and subsequent adventures of twin brothers in a small town. The


AIR FRANCE
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cast includes Goldhuber's former Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane colleagues Arthur Aviles and Heidi Latsky, and the evocative score is played live by the genre-busting ensemble Tin Hat. (Abrons Arts Center, 466 Grand St. 212-352-3101. Oct. 2-4 at 8 and Oct. 5 at 5.)

DADA VON BZDÜLÖW THEATRE

The Gdansk-based ensemble Dada von Bzdülöw Theatre performs "Factor T.," based on the writings of the Polish poet, novelist, philosopher, and filmmaker Stefan Themerson. In the piece, the dark humor of the Eastern European theatrical tradition meets the exploratory and seemingly improvisational techniques of postmodern dance. (St. Mark's In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 212-811-4111. Oct. 2-4 at 8:30.)

"REWIND"

The lead B-boys of Knucklehead Zoo have triumphed on MTV's America's Best Dance Crew, and the group itself won this year's Hip Hop International World B-Boy Battle, but their ambitions are bigger than that. "Rewind," the crew's first theatrical program, is an hour-long bid at a wider audience, combining old-school moves, a beatboxer, and a d.j. with state-of-the-art routines that borrow from acrobatics, capoeira, and anything else that will get a crowd cheering. (New Victory, 209 W. 42nd St. 646-223-3010. Oct. 3 at 7, Oct. 4 at 2 and 7, and Oct. 5 at noon and 5. Through Oct. 19.)

"DYPTIQUE"

The "Crossing Borders" festival finds its full expression in this double bill of solos (alternating at P.S. 122), the French-Algerian choreographer Rachid Ouramdane's "A Standing Boy" and the French experimental-theatre director Pascal Rambert's "With My Own Hands." Both explore identity through close readings of the body—in fact, Rambert's soloist, Kate Moran, performs in the nude. (P.S. 122, at 150 First Ave., at 9th St. 212-352-3101. Oct. 3-4 at 7:30 and 9.)

"BREAKING GROUND: A DANCE CHARRETTE"

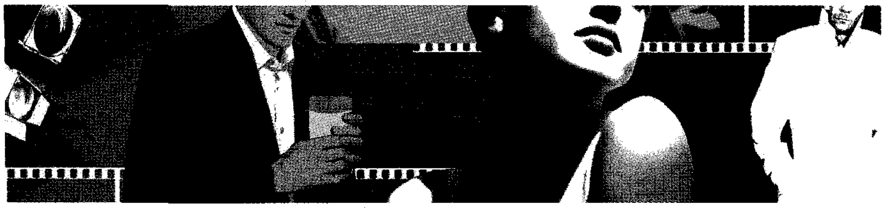
Breaking Ground is like a site-specific dance smackdown: a secret location is revealed to the public and to a small group of highly individualized choreographers, who each have five days to come up with a dance lasting about five minutes. This year, the site for the hour-long performance is the now-defunct Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn, New York's first municipal airport. The lineup includes the peripatetic Jonah Bokaer, Gus Solomons, Jr., of Paradigm, and the St. Lucia-born Tania Isaac. (212-625-3505. Oct. 4-5 at 12:30 and 2:30.)

NEW YORK TANGO FESTIVAL

The chief novelty of Mariela Franganillo's "Tango Noir" is the New York theatrical début of the young Argentinean brother act Los Hermanos Macana. Drawing on tango's roots in male-male pairings, the duo combines darting brilliance with a comic edge, treating the act of two men dancing together as both noble and laughable. Mariana Parma, the veteran Junior Cervila, Adriana Salgado, and Orlando Reyes complete the cast, along with the singer Hector Pablo Pereyra and a band led by Gustavo Casenave. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. 212-545-7536. Oct. 4 at 8.)

"WORKS & PROCESS"

American Ballet Theatre's fall season features a mini-festival honoring the great British choreographer Antony Tudor. In a preview, Kevin McKenzie (the director of the company) and Wes Chapman (the director of the junior ensemble ABT II) will join Diana Byer, of the New York Theatre Ballet (perhaps the city's most committed presenter of Tudor's works), to discuss Tudor's place in twentieth-century dance. Excerpts of several Tudor works spanning his career (from "Judgement of Paris" to "The Leaves Are Fading") will be performed. (Fifth Ave. at 89th St. 212-423-3587. Oct. 5-6 at 7:30.)



POP NOTES
HYNDE SIGHT

The title of "Boots of Chinese Plastic," which leads off the Pretenders' new album, **"Break Up the Concrete"** (Shangri-La), alludes to Bob Dylan's "Boots of Spanish Leather," but the song's propulsive rhythm and surreal lyrics mark it as a close cousin to another Dylan song, "Tombstone Blues." In just over two and a half minutes, the lead singer and songwriter, Chrissie Hynde, touches on everything from reincarnation to the global marketplace to the difficulties of ethical living. The next song, "The Nothing Maker," supplies some yin to go with the yang: it's a ballad about a lover whose greatest asset seems to be his lack of creative ambitions, sung with a dreaminess that may be concealing a deeper venom.

"Break Up the Concrete" is the first album of new material from the Pretenders since "Loose Screw," in 2002, and while that record found the band going for a seductive reggae vibe, this time the charge is straightforward roots rock. For years, the Pretenders have been a band in name only, consisting of a bunch of young hired hands doing the bidding of Hynde and, usually, the founding drummer, Martin Chambers. This time, Chambers is absent, though his replacement—the session veteran Jim Keltner—is a great deal more than capable. That's true of the entire band, in fact: the English guitarist James Walbourne, the pedal-steel player Eric Heywood, and the bassist Nick Wilkinson. The punky "Don't Cut Your Hair" blasts first and asks questions later; "Almost Perfect" steals along with a lovely tiptoe movement.

The band's enthusiasm is easy to understand; Hynde has written a superb set of songs here. Her persona is largely the same as it was on the band's 1979 début, which is to say that it is tough and smart and confident and questioning and vulgar and philosophical and energetic and weary all at once. The songs gain immediacy through direct address ("Don't Cut Your Hair," "You Didn't Have To," "Rosalee"), and the exceptions tend to be irresistible pop songs like "Love's a Mystery," in which Hynde employs a slightly elevated class of moon-June-spoon rhymes (morning/warning, mystery/history), but with the added benefit of context, sensibility, wisdom, and her nearly undiminished upper register. The title song, a rough sequel to "My City Was Gone," is an environmental anthem that doesn't see conservation as passive, or even particularly nonviolent: Hynde's idea of caring for the planet involves destroying what's been built by industry, with impunity ("thwack it, crack it, lineback it / break up the concrete"), and chronicling the assault with a Bo Diddley beat.

—*Ben Greenman*

CLASSICAL MUSIC
OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA

The magnetic Erwin Schrott—the current classical marketer's dream—takes the title role in **"Don Giovanni,"** heading an impressive cast that also includes Krassimira Stoyanova, Susan Graham, Isabel Leonard, Matthew Polenzani, and Ildebrando D'Arcangelo; Louis Langrée, a brisk and efficient Mozartean, conducts. (Oct. 1 and Oct. 4 at 8.) ♦ Ponchielli's **"La Gioconda"** is at once a farewell to Grand Opera and a preview of the verismo style of the composer's students (such as Mascagni). Margherita Wallmann's production is very, very old, but if "Gioconda" is well cast—and this revival features such singers as Deborah Voigt, Olga Borodina, Ewa Podleś, and James Morris—the piece can be captivating. Christopher Wheeldon contributes delectable choreography to "The Dance of the Hours"; Daniele Callegari. (Oct. 2 and Oct. 6 at 8.) ♦ Last season's opening-night attraction was Mary Zimmerman's new production of **"Lucia di Lammermoor,"** whose combination of mythic fantasy and dramatic verisimilitude delighted the daring but left traditionalists unmoved. Diana Damrau (who could definitely give 2007's Lucia, Natalie Dessay, a run for her money) takes the title role in this revival, joined by a fine roster that includes Piotr Beczala, Vladimir Stoyanov, and Ildar Abdrazakov; Marco Armiliato, the Met's reliable Italian hand, is on the podium. (Oct. 3 at 8.) ♦ Karita Mattila's jaw-dropping performance in the title role of **"Salome"** in 2004 set New York on its ear, with her (very) brief nude scene adding to the excitement. Now she's back, singing as bravely as ever, though at times her voice sounds the worse for wear. Jürgen Flimm's production, at once lurid and mystical, returns as well, with Ildikó Komlósi, Kim Begley, Joseph Kaiser, and Juha Uusitalo (a fearsome John the Baptist) completing the cast; Patrick Summers finds the danger, if not the derangement, in Strauss's thrilling score. (Oct. 4 at 1 and Oct. 7 at 8.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

NEW YORK PHILOMUSICA: "L'ISOLA DISABITATA"

The long-established chamber-music combine has both a love of Haydn and an adventurous streak, which this week extends to a concert performance of the composer's fanciful, rarely heard opera "The Deserted Island." The singers include the soprano Nicole Franklin and the tenor Scott Murphree. (Broadway Presbyterian Church, Broadway at 114th St. 212-580-9933. Oct. 2 at 8.)

AMERICAN SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA: "LE ROI D'YS"

Leon Botstein is at it again, striving to rescue late-nineteenth-century French operas from (mostly) undeserved neglect. He may well have a point about Edouard Lalo's work from 1888, a stirring Franco-Wagnerian mélange that was an established repertory item for decades after its première. The promising young cast includes the soprano Georgia Jarman and the baritone Eugene Brancoveanu. (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-721-6500. Oct. 3 at 8.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC

For the fourth time, the Philharmonic turns to the distinguished composer Bernard Rands for a commissioned work; "Chains Like the Sea," his latest, is inspired by two fragments from Dylan Thomas's beloved poem "Fern Hill." The program begins with Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 and closes with Tchaikovsky's graceful yet impassioned Suite No. 3 in G Major, his most underrated orchestral work.

JOHN RITTER

(Avery Fisher Hall. 212-875-5656. Oct. 1-2 at 7:30. Note: A "Hear & Now" talk with the composer, hosted by Steven Stucky and free to ticket holders, will be offered one hour before each performance.)

TORONTO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
First off in an impressive week of orchestras at Carnegie Hall is this fine Canadian ensemble, conducted by Peter Oundjian, which performs an offbeat program of two mid-twentieth-century sleepers: Kurt Weill's cuttingly satirical "Seven Deadly Sins" (with the chanteuse Ute Lemper and the vocal group Hudson Shad) and Shostakovich's roiling Symphony No. 11 ("The Year 1905"). (212-247-7800. Oct. 4 at 8.)

THE MET ORCHESTRA
James Levine is back at the helm of his virtuosic opera orchestra, which shows its range with a challenging concert featuring Beethoven's "Grosse Fuge," Messiaen's "Et Exspecto Resurrectionem Mortuorum," and Brahms's Violin Concerto (with the transcendent Christian Tetzlaff). (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. Oct. 5 at 3.)

PHILADELPHIA ORCHESTRA
Charles Dutoit and the "Fabulous Philadelphians" cleave to tradition in a down-the-line program of twentieth-century standards that includes Ravel's "Valses Nobles et Sentimentales," Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" (orchestrated by Ravel), and the First Piano Concertos of Prokofiev and Shostakovich (with Martha Argerich scheduled as the soloist). (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. Oct. 7 at 8.)

RECITALS

"LEON FLEISHER AND FRIENDS"
The extraordinarily eloquent American pianist joins three keyboard companions—Yefim Bronfman, Jonathan Biss, and his wife, Katherine Jacobsen Fleisher—at Zankel Hall for a concert of favorite solo and four-hand works by Bach, Schumann, Schubert (the Fantasie in F Minor), Beethoven (the Sonata No. 27 in E Minor), and Ravel ("La Valse"). (212-247-7800. Oct. 2 at 7:30.)

MUSIC AT THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Oct. 2 at 8: The string quartets of Beethoven, rock-solid repertory, will be spread out among six ensembles at the museum this season. First up is the vibrant Pacifica Quartet, offering the quartets in B-Flat Major, Op. 18, No. 6; in F Minor ("Serioso"); and in A Minor, Op. 132. ♦ Oct. 4 at 8: Continuing its commitment to the finest young musicians, the museum presents the pianist Rafal Blechacz, a Deutsche Grammophon artist and the winner of the 2005 Chopin Competition, in a concert featuring works by Mozart, Debussy ("Estampes"), Szymanowski, and Chopin (the Three Mazurkas, Op. 50, and the Sonata No. 3 in B Minor). (Fifth Ave. at 83rd St. 212-570-3949.)

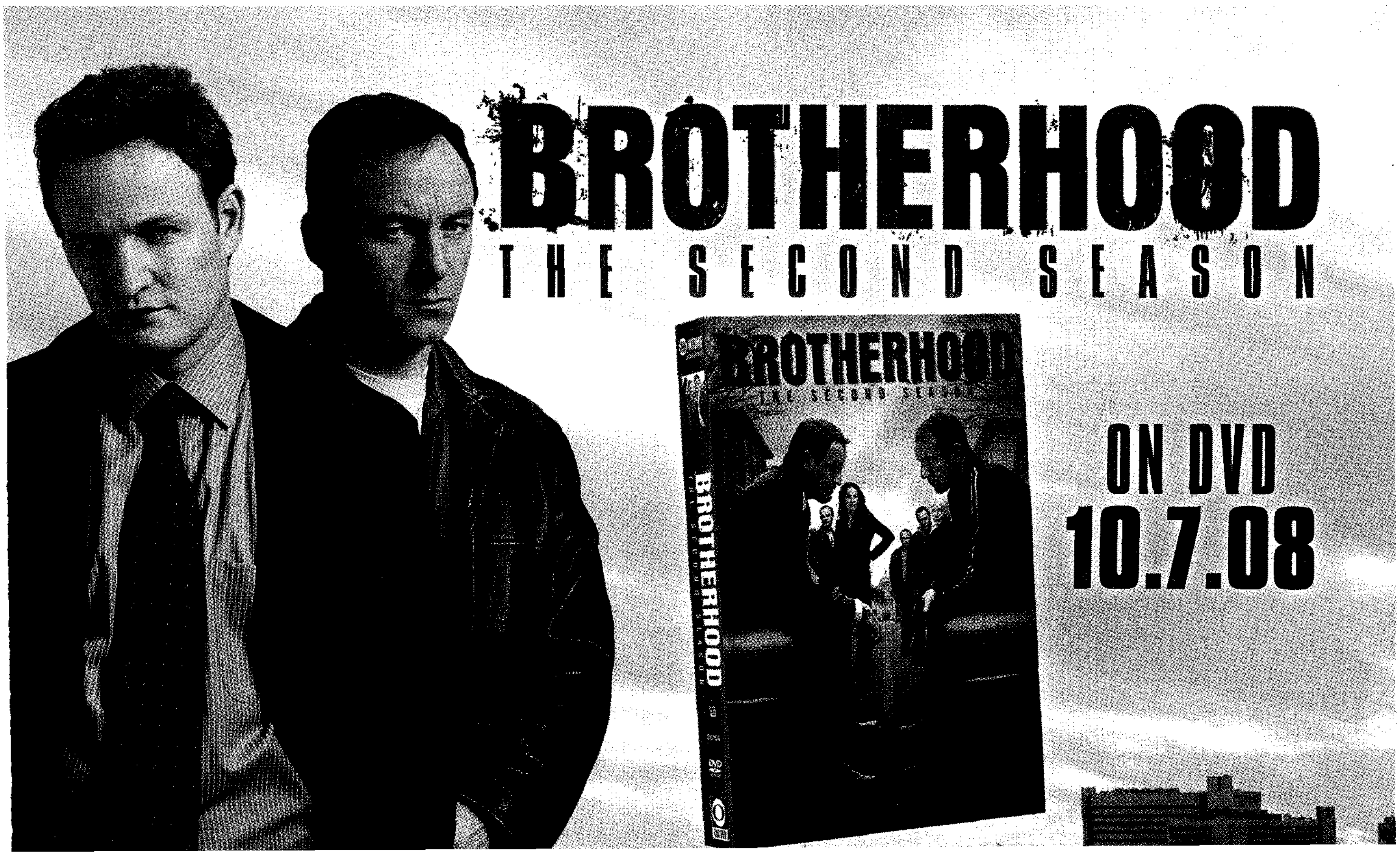
"AU COMMENCEMENT, MONTEVERDI"
Music has been but a small part of the French Institute Alliance Française's "Crossing the Line" festival, but the final offering is oddly tempting: a concert by the French cellist Sonia Wieder-Atherton that mixes music by the innovative Venetian master with contemporary works by such composers as Berio, Dutillieux, and Kurtág. The venue is Le Skyroom, the FIAF's intimate rooftop space. (22 E. 60th St. 212-307-4100. Oct. 2-4 at 8.)

WASHINGTON SQUARE CONTEMPORARY MUSIC
The members of this New York University new-music ensemble head uptown to Merkin Concert Hall to toast the composer Charles Wuorinen in his seventieth year. In addition to three Wuorinen works ("Iridule," "Viola Variations," and the String Quartet No. 1), the program features music by Morton Feldman, Louis Karchin, and John Zorn (who will be on hand to offer a solo-saxophone improvisation). (212-501-3330. Oct. 2 at 8.)

CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER: "FÊTE FRANÇAISE"
French music takes center stage in this, the first of four concerts devoted to composers from *le beau pays*. The first (which features such musicians as the pianists Gilbert Kalish and Wu Han and the violinist Daniel Hope) draws from both the festive and cerebral sides of the Gallic repertoire—works by Boulez, Milhaud ("La Création du Monde"), Ravel ("Tzigane"), and Messiaen (the "Quartet for the End of Time"). (New York Society for Ethical Culture, 4 W. 64th St. 212-875-5788. Oct. 3 at 7:30 and Oct. 5 at 5.)

"MUSIC BEFORE 1800" SERIES: MARION VERBRUGGEN
The exciting Dutch recorder player, a mainstay of the authentic-performance movement for two decades, comes to Corpus Christi Church for an afternoon of Vivaldi concertos (including "La Pastorella" and "Summer" from "The Four Seasons"), backed up by members of San Francisco's Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra. (529 W. 121st St. 212-666-9266. Oct. 5 at 4.)

BRIDGEHAMPTON CHAMBER MUSIC FESTIVAL
Celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary, the fine Hamptons festival stays in town to perform music by Paul Moravec (the Chamber Symphony), Aaron Jay Kernis, and Schubert (the String Quintet) at Carnegie's Weill Recital Hall. The festival's founder, the flutist Marya Martin, will be joined by an impressive lineup of musicians that includes the cellist Fred Sherry, the violist Cynthia Phelps, and the hornist Erik Ralske. (212-247-7800. Oct. 6 at 8.)



MOVIES OPENING

ALLAH MADE ME FUNNY
A documentary about a trio of Muslim American comedians. Directed by Michael Wolfe. Opening Oct. 3. (Quad Cinema.)

AN AMERICAN CAROL
In this comedy, directed by David Zucker, an anti-American filmmaker (Kevin P. Farley) is given a lesson in patriotism. Opening Oct. 3. (In wide release.)

"Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist," a comedy directed by Peter Sollett, opens Oct. 3.

BALLAST
Reviewed below in Now Playing. Opening Oct. 1. (Film Forum.)

BEVERLY HILLS CHIHUAHUA
A talking-dog comedy, directed by Raja Gosnell, starring Jamie Lee Curtis, and featuring the voices of Drew Barrymore and Andy Garcia, about a pampered pet who gets lost in Mexico. Opening Oct. 3. (In wide release.)

BLINDNESS
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Oct. 3. (In wide release.)

FLASH OF GENIUS
A drama, based on an article by John Seabrook for this magazine, about an inventor (Greg Kinnear) who claims that automakers stole his idea for the intermittent windshield wiper. Directed by Marc Abraham. Opening Oct. 3. (In wide release.)

HOW TO LOSE FRIENDS AND ALIENATE PEOPLE
A comedy, based on a memoir by Toby Young, about a British writer (Simon Pegg) who goes to work for an American magazine. Directed by Robert B. Weide. Opening Oct. 3. (In wide release.)

HUMBOLDT COUNTY
Darren Grodsky and Danny Jacobs directed this comedy, about a straitlaced medical student (Jeremy Strong) who visits a community of pot farmers. Opening Oct. 3. (In limited release.)

NICK AND NORAH'S INFINITE PLAYLIST
Michael Cera and Kat Dennings star in this teen romance, as a musician and a fan in quest of a secret rock show. Directed by Peter Sollett. Opening Oct. 3. (In wide release.)

THE PLEASURE OF BEING ROBBED
A romantic comedy, directed by and co-starring Josh Safdie, about the adventures of a free-spirited woman (Eléonore Hendricks). Opening Oct. 3. (IFC Center.)

RACHEL GETTING MARRIED
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Oct. 3. (In limited release.)

RELIGULOUS
Larry Charles directed this documentary, featuring Bill Maher's interviews with people around the world about organized religion. Opening Oct. 1. (Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Square.)

NOW PLAYING

APPALOOSA
A well-made, satisfying, traditionalist Western with some odd quirks and turns. Virgil Cole (Ed Harris) and his deputy, Everett Hitch (Viggo Mortensen), are guns for hire in the Old West—longtime partners who communicate mainly with glances, nods, a few gnomic words, and a deepening stillness that suddenly explodes into violence. In 1882, they enter Appaloosa, a New Mexico frontier town, and offer their services to people who are being terrorized by a rapacious landowner and gang leader (Jeremy Irons). The movie offers a fresh character in Allie French (Renée Zellweger), who seems, at first, the usual refined lady from the East. She latches on to Virgil, breaking up the chaste, straightback-mountain love affair of Virgil and Hitch, but she's not quite what either man expects—that is, she's neither a wife nor a whore but a little of both. Harris, who directed, revels in the wide-open spaces and the drab, dusty little towns; the Old West comes off as a scary and melancholy place. Shot outside Santa Fe by Dean Semler. With Timothy Spall and Ariadna Gil.—*David Denby* (Reviewed in our issue of 9/29/08.) (In wide release.)

BALLAST
The writer-director Lance Hammer's cannily calculated independent début feature packs the melodramatic wallop of Hollywood storytelling into its low-key on-location naturalism. The absorbing story, set in a desolate patch of the Mississippi Delta in wintertime, begins obliquely, as a man is found dead, a suicide, in his modest home. What emerges is a family saga, played out on an intimate scale, involving the dead man's ex-wife (Tarra Riggs), who had taken out an order of protection against him, his teen-age son, James (JimMyron Ross), who is involved with drug dealers, and his twin brother (Micheal J. Smith, Sr.), who ran a convenience store with him but has been reduced to passivity. Though working outside the studio system and seeming to offer an alternative aesthetic, Hammer pushes every button as knowingly as a Hollywood player: each piece of his script fits as if in a mosaic; the portentous, artificially moody images serve as mere illustrations; and he gets his immensely sympathetic cast of nonactors to emote like pros. Only a stone-hearted viewer could fail to root for the central trio in their struggles against poverty and pain, but, when the lights go up, it's hard to avoid the feeling of having been taken in by formulas packaged as homemade.—*Richard Brody* (Film Forum.)

BURN AFTER READING
This very black comedy by the Coen brothers is set in the pale-white light of a rather blanched Washington, D.C., an uninspiring and uncomfortable place in which everyone betrays everyone and the tone veers between icy politeness and spitting rage and then back again. The movie has abundant momentum—short, tightly knit scenes of people arguing, driving around, screwing, and fighting—but the farcical plot is so bleak and unfunny that it freezes your responses after about forty-five minutes. Frances McDormand is the gym administrator who thinks she needs money for extensive work on her face, arms, and tummy so she can meet better guys through an Internet dating service; Brad Pitt is her friend, a feckless, pre-sexual child who is constantly sucking on a water bottle. The two haplessly try to blackmail a canned, choleric C.I.A. agent (John Malkovich), and they cross paths with a variety of other lost people, including George Clooney's lightweight Lothario, a U.S. marshal who would sleep with a butterfly. Some of the actors show great professional skill, but the meanness of the entire conception is tiresome. The movie is the most emotionally stunted work of the brothers' career to date. With Tilda Swinton and Richard Jenkins.—*D.D.* (9/15/08) (In wide release.)

THE DUCHESS
A slice from the life of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire (Keira Knightley), who, we are told, cut a swath through English high society in the second half of the eighteenth century. The swath, as represented in Saul Dibb's film, seems less than formidable; the heroine's political acumen is displayed early on, in repartee at dinner, but then left largely to wilt, and her most memorable social appearance is a drunken stagger, during which her hedge-size wig catches fire. Ralph Fiennes plays her husband in a clever and, one suspects, accurate portrayal of a chilly pragmatist bent on producing an heir. If there is dullness at the heart of the film, that may be due less to the director (though he should have cut it by a good ten minutes) than to the source material; attempts to link Georgiana's story with a broken royal marriage of more recent vintage are tendentious at best. The most diverting character is Lady Elizabeth Foster (Hayley Atwell), the Duke's mistress, who moved in to create a ménage à trois, and who should have been the heroine of this movie. Atwell is bewitching enough to have held it in her spell. With Charlotte Rampling and, as Charles James Fox, a sly Simon McBurney.—*Anthony Lane* (In wide release.)

THE FAMILY THAT PREYS
The writer and director Tyler Perry, a savvy businessman (he owns all his films outright) who knows his audience (predominately Christian African-Americans), serves up another mediocre, mawkish chapter of his family-first movies. This one concerns two Southern matriarchs (Alfre Woodard and Kathy Bates) who laugh, cry, and wheedle their way through their problems. The film is boilerplate Perry: strong female characters (some selfish, some generous), soap-opera high jinks, and a love-will-find-a-way dénouement. The script is preposterous (a greedy daughter's comeuppance is portrayed in such broad strokes that the resolution feels trite and dishonest), but Bates and Woodard give lively performances that help it glide along, and Perry photographs everyone in a lovely amber light, which masks the thinly conceived characters in a sappy glow.—*Bruce Diones* (In wide release.)

FROWNLAND
This amazingly accomplished first feature by Ronald Bronstein, made with a crew of four for seemingly little more than the cost of film stock, throbs with the energy and vision that independent filmmaking is all about. The story concerns the struggle of a socially challenged, nearly aphasic yet smart, painfully self-aware, and desperately lonely young man to get through his days and nights. Keith (Dore Mann) is the odd man out in the crew of chirpy losers with whom he works selling coupon books door to door;

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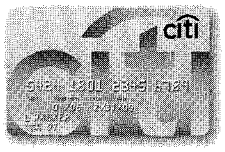

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he has a woman friend, Laura (Mary Wall, Bronstein's wife), who is even more tormented and self-destructive than he is, and an irresponsible roommate (Paul Grimstad) whose own travails end in ruin. Bronstein specializes in moments of embarrassment and minor emotional bruises that blend pain with gentle, witty humor. With a sharp eye for telling details, he avoids satire and bathos and creates characters of a rare complexity, which his incisive and passionate visual style (with its rare attention to light and its absence) realizes empathetically. If there's any justice, Mann, whom Bronstein found working in a supermarket, will get an award for his transfixing performance; his clenched jaws, squinting eyes, and stifled speech avoid all stereotypes as he brings the character to life from within.—*R.B.* (BAM; Oct. 2.)

GHOST TOWN

David Koepp, the co-writer of some of Steven Spielberg's biggest hits, turns the volume down to direct this romantic comedy, which breaks a cardinal rule of the genre: there's no kissing. Ricky Gervais stars as Bertram Pincus, a misanthropic dentist who, after a medical accident, sees ghosts—one of whom, the spirit of a philandering husband (Greg Kinnear), recruits Bertram to break up the engagement of his widow (Téa Leoni). The spry and lively screenplay, brought to life in clean New York locations, gives the actors plenty of moments to sparkle, and Koepp crafts small, sharp scenes as if he's conducting a pirouette. The film's touch of sentimentality makes it seem like a throwback to a gentler era, but Gervais tempers it with his faultless, cranky timing—no one does insecure grandiosity better. With Billy Campbell, Aasif Mandvi, and a scene-stealing Kristen Wiig.—*B.D.* (In wide release.)

IN GIRUM IMUS NOCTE ET CONSUMIMUR IGNI

Middle-class people are slaves, movies are lies, freedom is illusory, everything is worse than before: so says Guy Debord in the lecture that makes up most of the soundtrack of this 1978 film essay—and that's just the beginning. Despising images, which he assimilates to the corrupt "society of the spectacle" that he inveighs against, he fills the screen mainly with what he considers junk—old trailers and film clips, home movies, press clippings, and sometimes even nothing—as an expression of contempt for all movies (except his own) and for all viewers (except those who agree with him). Yet as his rant takes an autobiographical turn it rises to a sublime rhetorical pitch. Celebrating his youthful philosophical revelry in the cafés of postwar Saint-Germain-des-Prés, a Parisian paradise he now considers despoiled, he gives his own insurrectionary cabal, the so-called Situationists, full and sole credit for May '68, for which, he claims—not least in the Latin palindrome of the title, which means "At night we walk in circles and are consumed by fire"—they paid the price. Debord's preening, nihilistic, perpetually adolescent narcissism is seductive as hell yet utterly empty; his self-righteous celebration of this emptiness, collapsing upon itself with negative energy, is a cinematic black hole. In French.—*R.B.* (New York Film Festival; Oct. 3.)

LAKEVIEW TERRACE

Neil LaBute's latest film, written by David Loughery and Howard Korder, is hard to place. It begins as a seething social drama, with the arrival of a mixed-race couple (Patrick Wilson and Kerry Washington) in a placid, law-abiding corner of Los Angeles. Here they bump up against their next-door neighbor, Abel Turner (Samuel L. Jackson), a policeman of implacable pride and prejudice. Jackson revels in the role, lording it over the other characters and turning the tale into a comedy of aggression and unease; you can sense the pleasure that he and LaBute derive from jostling the audience's racial attitudes. It's a shame, then, that the latter stages of the movie let us off the hook, settling for the contrivances and showdowns of a standard thriller; the setup seemed both more potent and more plausible when it was allowed to simmer. With Regine Nehy, who plays Abel's teen-age daughter with the perfect blend of languor and defiance, and who deserves to go far.—*A.L.* (9/22/08) (In wide release.)

THE LAST COMMAND

In his fourth feature, from 1928, Josef von Sternberg told a tale of two revolutions, one Communist, the other cinematic. A former general in the czar's army, now eking out a living as a Hollywood extra, is cast as a Russian general in a First World War drama that is directed by a Soviet émigré he once knew—from across the battle lines of the revolution. In costume, he muses on his years in uniform, and the last days of imperial Russia unfurl as an hour-long flashback. Though von Sternberg caricatures the revolutionaries' vulgarity and cruelty, he is as biliously satirical toward the upstarts of Hollywood: his analogy between a movie set and a battlefield turns into perverse psychodrama through the make-believe general's real-life recollections. It is dreadful to imagine what von Sternberg, who was all of thirty-four, must already have suffered to be able to stage humiliation with such piercing discernment. The general is played by the titanic Emil Jannings (who soon after chose von Sternberg to direct him in "The Blue Angel"); the suavely cynical director is William Powell; Evelyn Brent is the passionate Bolshevik who once came between them. Silent.—*R.B.* (New York Film Festival; Oct. 6.)

NIGHT AND DAY

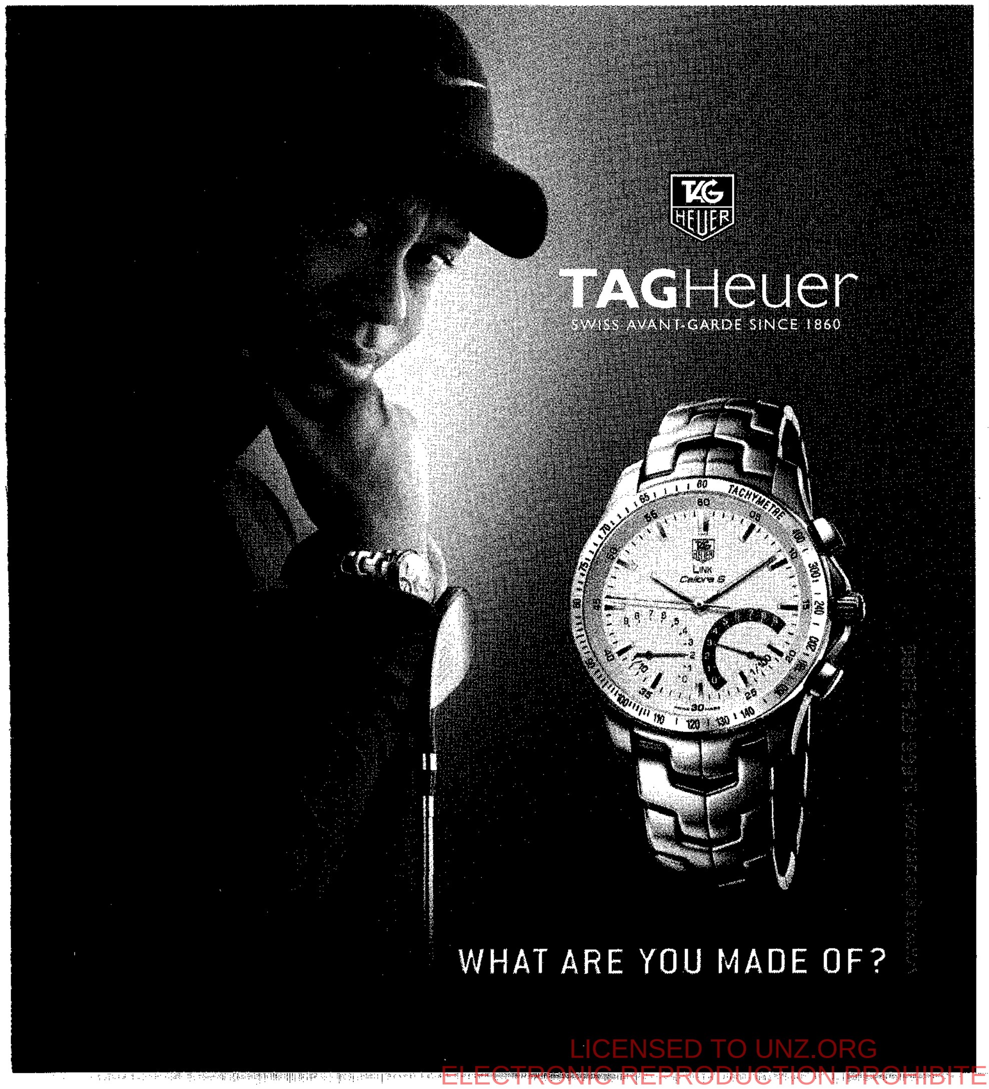
The Korean director Hong Sang-Soo takes on the self-imposed challenge of filming boredom and frustration without becoming boring and frustrating. Though he doesn't always succeed, he redeems even the few bare patches with exquisite style, self-excoriating confessional audacity, and keen cultural criticism. Most of the film takes place in Paris, to which Sung-Nam, a no-longer-young artist from Seoul, flees when he expects to be arrested on drug charges. Living in sodden exile in a hostel in the Fourteenth Arrondissement, with nothing to do and little to hope for, he settles into the Korean expatriate community and finds his thoughts and days revolving around three young women who are well aware that he has a wife back home. Hong presents their uneasy liaisons as a series of diary entries, which are dated by title cards and apostrophized by Sung-Nam's voice-over remarks, and he films them in tense, restrained long takes that suggest the sharp, dry strokes of engravings. Yet the clumsy entanglements they reveal are worlds away from the psychological subtleties of indigenous French romances, and this is Hong's point. Despite the ease of travel and the cross-cultural curiosity of contemporary globalized artists, the difference between modern France and repressed, tradition-bound South Korea remains, in Hong's view, as great as the title suggests. In Korean, French, and English.—*R.B.* (New York Film Festival; Oct. 4.)

RIGHTEOUS KILL

Al Pacino and Robert De Niro, acting together as aging N.Y.P.D. detectives, send up a howling wind of boasts, profane stories, lewd jokes, denunciations of criminals, expressions of admiration for each other, and mutual reassurances of their own virtue as cops. We've heard more enlightening dialogue at closing time in an Upper Broadway bar, but the two go at it furiously, as if the raw humor and mawkish bombast were somehow the soul of humanity. The movie, written by Russell Gewirtz and directed by Jon Avnet, is nonsense about a serial killer who leaves behind poems at the scene of the crime. Suspicion is thrown on one character, yet, when the killer turns out to be someone else, we're left not with the elation of solving a mystery from planted clues but with the chagrin of having been taken in by a ruse. Hectic, exhausting, unrewarding. With the lovely Carla Gugino, who is having some sort of "hot" sadomasochistic love affair (they stage mock rapes in her apartment) with De Niro.—*D.D.* (9/29/08) (In wide release.)

A THOUSAND YEARS OF GOOD PRAYERS

There isn't a missed beat in Wayne Wang's new film, a quiet symphony about a distant Chinese father (Henry O) visiting his newly divorced daughter (Faye Yu) in America, where he befriends an elderly Iranian woman (Vida Ghahremani). The title of the film refers to an old proverb about what it takes for a father and daughter to truly communicate, and



the film reflects a solemn, almost churchlike atmosphere that's both contemplative and soothing. Wang's concerns are modest: gently prodding the cultural and generational issues between father and daughter, he avoids any histrionic scenes that would break the film's sad and gentle tempo. In Mandarin, Farsi, and English.—*B.D.* (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

THE WHITE SHEIK
In his first feature film, Federico Fellini was already the maestro of his trademark mood—pathos-tinged gaiety. Filmed in the scarred, depressed Italy of 1952, this romantic satire of a young wife's escapist fantasies boasts a free and fresh spirit that recalls classic silent comedy. While on a brief Roman honeymoon with her officious husband, Ivan (Leopoldo Trieste), the provincial newlywed Wanda Giardino Cavalli (Brunella Bovo) sneaks off to meet the White Sheik (Alberto Sordi), the he-man of her dreams: a swashbuckling hero of the *fumetti*, comic-book-like magazines that tell stories in photographs. Every character is absurd: Wanda mistakes manufactured pop for amorous reality; Ivan walks a path too straight and too narrow even for him; and the hilariously pillowy Sheik is an inauthentic narcissist, hopelessly in love with his own concocted image. All the performers are at least amusing (including Giulietta Masina in the first presentation of her frisky prostitute, Cabiria), and Sordi is splendid. He has a grungy noblesse oblige. With his parody of sensuality, he's like something that would float into Wanda's head during a bubble bath. In Italian.—*Michael Sragow* (Film Forum; Oct. 3-4.)

THE WOMEN
A remake of George Cukor's film of 1939, with the screen once more denuded of men. The title is unchanged, and so are the names of many characters, together with their bottomless reserves of cash; we are plunged as before into a marital crisis, with Mary Haines (Meg Ryan, taking over the Norma Shearer role) discovering that her husband has been seeing a shopgirl. The part of the temptress, played formerly by Joan Crawford, now goes to Eva Mendes, so at least the new version gains something in credibility. Apart from that, it is a poor travesty of the original, with one dud zinger after another sinking to the floor, the air thick with either vengeance or gratification, and the entire cast—save Candice Bergen and Cloris Leachman, experienced hands who know how to rise above disaster—looking unmistakably ill at ease. (The writer and director is Diane English, who worked with Bergen on the TV series "Murphy Brown.") The fashion show, slotted into Cukor's monochrome movie as a classy yet lengthy flourish of color, has now been shifted toward the end, but it doesn't help. With Annette Bening, Jada Pinkett Smith, and Debra Messing.—*A.L.* (9/22/08) (In wide release.)

Also Playing

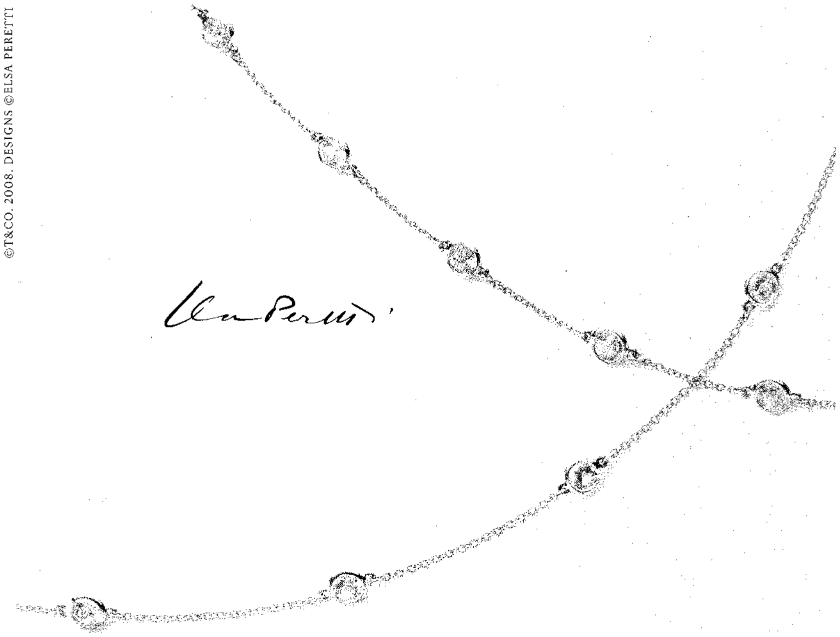
CHOKE: In limited release. **THE LUCKY ONES:** In wide release. **MIRACLE AT ST. ANNA:** In wide release. **NIGHTS IN RODANTHE:** In wide release.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES
32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (212-505-5181)—Through Oct. 11: New York Turkish Film Festival. For program information, visit www.nyturkishfilmfestival.com. ♦ The films of Nathaniel Dorsky. Oct. 2 at 8: Program 1, including "Pneuma" (1977-83). ♦ Oct. 6 at 7: Program 2, including "Song and Solitude" (2005-06). ♦ "The Walking Picture Palace." Oct. 6 at 9: Short-film program, including "Binghamton, My India" (ca. 1971-72, Ken Jacobs).

BAM ROSE CINEMAS
30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-636-4100)—"Brooklyn Close-Up." Oct. 2 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:30: "Frownland" (†). The 6:50 screening will be followed by a Q. & A. with the director. ♦ The films of Barbet Schroeder. Oct. 3-9 at 2, 4:30, 6:50, and 9:15: "Six in Paris" (1965, Jean-Luc Go-



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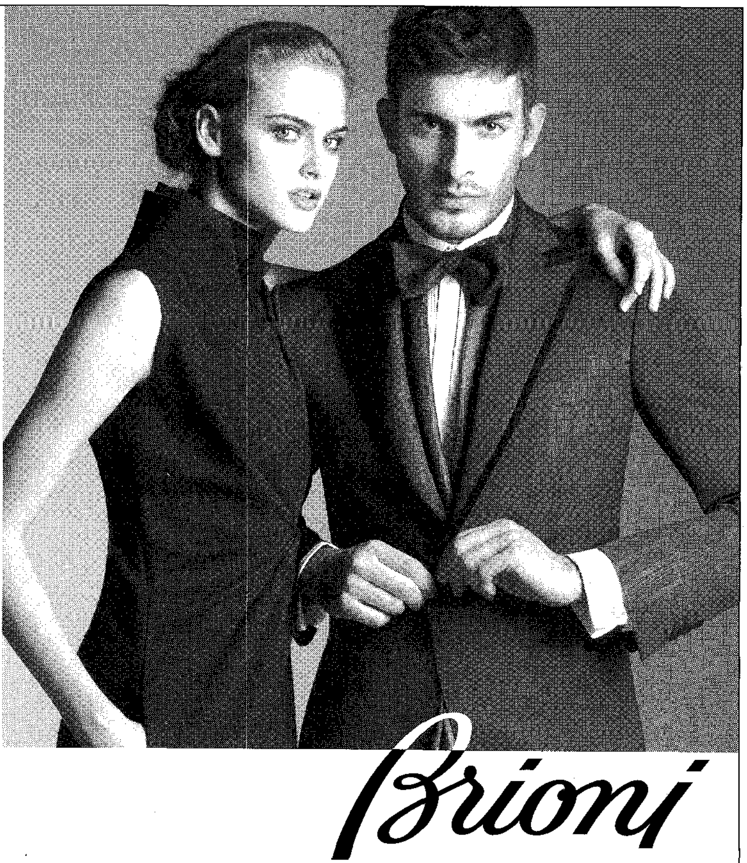

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dard, Eric Rohmer, Claude Chabrol, Jean Rouch, Jean Douchet, and Jean-Daniel Pollet; in French).

FILM FORUM

W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110)—In revival. Oct. 1-2 at 1:10, 3:20, 5:30, 7:40, and 9:50: "Alexander Nevsky" (1938, Sergei Eisenstein; in Russian). ♦ Oct. 1-2 at 4:45: "The Godfather" (1972, Francis Ford Coppola). ♦ Oct. 1-2 at 1 and 8:35: "The Godfather Part II" (1974, Coppola). ♦ Through Oct. 9: The films of Alberto Sordi. All films are in Italian except where noted. Oct. 3-4 at 1, 4:40, and 8:20: "The White Sheik" (†). ♦ Oct. 3-4 at 2:40, 6:20, and 10: "I Vitelloni" (1953, Federico Fellini). ♦ Oct. 5-6 at 1:30, 5:40, and 9:50: "Mafioso" (1962, Alberto Lattuada). ♦ Oct. 5-6 at 3:30 and 7:40: "Lo Scopone Scientifico" (1972, Luigi Comencini; in Italian and English). ♦ Oct. 7 at 1, 3:45, 6:30, and 9:15: "La Grande Guerra" (1959, Mario Monicelli).

FRENCH INSTITUTE ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE

Florence Gould Hall, 55 E. 59th St. (212-355-6160)—Special screening. Oct. 1 at 7: "Eldorado/Preljocaj" (2008, Olivier Assayas). ♦ "I Kiffe NY: French Urban Cultures." Oct. 7 at 12:30 and 7: "Ain't Scared" (2006, Audrey Estrougo; in French). The 7 P.M. screening will be introduced by the director. ♦ Oct. 7 at 4: "My City Is Going to Crack" (1997, Jean-François Richet; in French).

IFC CENTER

323 Sixth Ave., at W. 3rd St. (212-924-7771)—In revival. Oct. 3-5 at 11 A.M.: "Hour of the Wolf" (1968, Ingmar Bergman; in Swedish). ♦ "Stranger Than Fiction," a documentary series. Oct. 7 at 8: "Blood Trail" (2008, Richard Parry), introduced by the director.

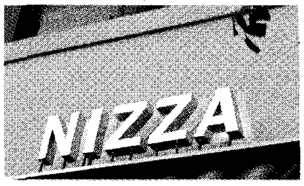
MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9480)—"Hollywood on the Hudson: Filmmaking in New York, 1920-39." Oct. 1 at 6:15 and Oct. 2 at 8:30: "So's Your Old Man" (1926, Gregory La Cava; silent). ♦ Oct. 1 at 8:15 and Oct. 4 at 4:15: "Zaza" (1923, Allan Dwan; silent). ♦ Oct. 2 at 5 and Oct. 4 at 8:15: "Santa Lucia Luntana" (1932, Harold Godsoe). ♦ Oct. 2 at 8: "Applause" (1929, Rouben Mamoulian). ♦ Oct. 3 at 4:30 and Oct. 4 at 2: "Humoresque" (1920, Frank Borzage; silent). ♦ Oct. 3 at 6:30 and Oct. 6 at 5: "Paradise in Harlem (Othello in Harlem)" (1939, Joseph Seiden). ♦ Oct. 3 at 8 and Oct. 5 at 1: "Murder in Harlem (Lem Hawkins' Confession)" (1935, Oscar Micheaux). ♦ Oct. 4 at 6:30: "The Middleton Family at the New York World's Fair" (1939, Robert Snody). ♦ Oct. 5 at 3: "Tevye" (1939, Maurice Schwartz; in Yiddish). ♦ Oct. 5 at 5: "Green Fields" (Edgar G. Ulmer; in Yiddish). ♦ Through Oct. 13: "Delwende" and African films from the museum's collection. Oct. 5 at 2: "Rachida" (2002, Yamina Bachir-Chouikh; in Arabic).

NEW YORK FILM FESTIVAL

Lincoln Center (212-875-5610)—Screenings are held at a variety of venues. For complete program information, visit www.filmlinc.com. Oct. 1 at 6 and Oct. 2 at 9: "Summer Hours" (2008, Olivier Assayas; in French). ♦ Oct. 1 at 9:15 and Oct. 2 at 6: "Waltz with Bashir" (2008, Ari Folman; in Hebrew). ♦ Oct. 3 at 6 and Oct. 5 at 9: "Gomorrah" (2008, Matteo Garrone; in Italian). ♦ Oct. 3 at 9:30 and Oct. 5 at 3: "Four Nights with Anna" (2008, Jerzy Skolimowski; in Polish). ♦ Oct. 4 at 11:15 A.M.: "Lola Montès" (1955, Max Ophüls; in French), introduced by the critic Andrew Sarris. ♦ Oct. 4 at 2:30: "Night and Day" (†). ♦ Oct. 4 at 6:15 and midnight: "Ashes of Time Redux" (1994/2008, Wong Kar-wai; in Cantonese). ♦ Oct. 4 at 9:15 and Oct. 5 at 11:15 A.M.: "Changeling" (2008, Clint Eastwood). ♦ Oct. 5 at 6: "The Windmill Movie" (2008, Alexander Olch). ♦ Oct. 6 at 6: "Afterschool" (2008, Antonio Campos). ♦ Oct. 6 at 9:15: "The Headless Woman" (2008, Lucrecia Martel; in Spanish). ♦ Oct. 7 at 6: "Che" (2008, Steven Soderbergh). ♦ The films of Nagisa Oshima. All films are in Japanese. Oct. 2 at 6:30: "Pleasures of the Flesh" (1965). ♦ Oct. 2 at 8:40: "Band of Ninja" (1967). ♦ Oct. 3 at 4:30 and Oct. 7 at 8:45: "Japanese Summer: Double Suicide" (1967). ♦ Oct. 3 at 10: "In the Realm of the Senses" (1976). ♦ "Views from the Avant-Garde." Oct. 3 at 6:30: Program 1, "In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni" (†), followed by a discussion with the filmmakers Olivier Assayas and Jean-Pierre Gorin and the writer Greil Marcus. ♦ Oct. 4 at noon: Program 2, including "Whispers" (2008, Ernie Gehr). ♦ Special screening. Oct. 6 at 6 and 8:30: "The Last Command" (†), with live musical accompaniment by the Alloy Orchestra.

TABLES FOR TWO
NIZZA


HONORE BROWN

630 Ninth Ave. (212-956-1800)—Nizza is the Italian name for Nice, a city that was under Italian control for much of its history—Garibaldi was a *nizzardo* and was very annoyed when his home town was ceded to France, in 1860. Its food, a blend of Italian and Provençal influences, is handily exploited by this competitively priced restaurant. Although there are a few photographs evoking Nice's café-society glory days and, outside, a Vespa (an obligatory talisman of Europeanness for New York restaurants), Nizza's atmosphere seems closer to diner than to charming French boîte. The light-wood fittings and long bar are thoroughly neutral; food comes on family-style oval dishes; and the music is on the loud side.

The most interesting offerings are regional specialities, such as *tomaxelle*, a Ligurian dish of stuffed veal rolls, and *socca*, a flat, round cake made of chickpea flour and topped with sage, onion, and Pecorino cheese—crisp and glistening on the outside, gluey and mealy within—a hearty item that tastes more like sausage than bread. The dish is a bit of a mascot: at brunch, you can have it with eggs on top. The rest of the menu peps up the familiar with a dash of novelty. Bruschetta is topped with broccoli puréed to the consistency of pesto; an otherwise average chicken salad conceals a slice of duck salami. Not every dish comes off—a zucchini salad was over-oiled and confused as to whether it was meant to taste of raisins, mint, marjoram, or (hey) zucchini—but the standard of cooking is often equal to that of a much more ambitious restaurant.

Down the block from Nizza, and, oddly, sharing the same address, is a restaurant called Marseille. How much Riviera can Ninth Avenue take? In fact, both restaurants are part of a group that started years ago with French Roast and gradually added establishments that gesture toward regional cuisines ranging from Lyonnais (L'Express) to Breton (Maison). Currently, there are a couple of storefronts between the two restaurants, but it's surely only a matter of time until they are filled in with eateries called Saint-Tropez, Monaco, and Cap Ferrat. (Open daily for lunch and dinner and weekends for brunch and dinner. Entrées $12-$17.)

—*Leo Carey*

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Take advantage of this last-minute opportunity; the deadline in New York State to register for the November election is October 10th.

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RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART
150 W. 17th St. (212-620-5000, ext. 344)—"Cabaret Cinema." Oct. 3 at 9:30: "Breathless" (1959, Jean-Luc Godard; in French).

THALIA THEATRE
Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. (212-864-5400)—Through Nov. 2: "Paul Schrader's Personal Choice." Oct. 5 at 4 and 8: "Point Blank" (1967, John Boorman). ♦ Oct. 5 at 6: "Light Sleeper" (1992, Schrader).

READINGS AND TALKS

MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
The journalist Nicholas Lemann talks politics with Theodore C. Sorensen, former adviser to President John F. Kennedy. (Museum of the City of New York, Fifth Ave. at 103rd St. 212-534-1672. Oct. 1 at 6:30.)

SYMPHONY SPACE
Salman Rushdie, the editor of "The Best American Short Stories 2008," kicks off the new season of "Selected Shorts" with help from the actors Jane Alexander and Anthony Rapp. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. 212-864-5400. Oct. 1 at 7.)

92ND STREET Y
Oct. 2 at 8: Arthur Gelb, John Silber, Theodore Bikel, and other writers, musicians, and filmmakers join Elie Wiesel for a celebration of his eightieth birthday. ♦ Oct. 5 at 7:30: Whoopi Goldberg and other comedians reflect on the life and work of the late George Carlin. (Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500.)

BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY
Dalia Sofer, the author of the novel "The Septembers of Shiraz," talks about her work with the radio host Leonard Lopate. (Grand Army Plaza. No tickets necessary. Oct. 4 at 4.)

"POEMS & PINTS"
The Poetry Society of America and the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council inaugurate a new monthly reading series at the Fraunces Tavern with appearances by Anna Rabinowitz and Rosanna Warren. (54 Pearl St. For more information, call 212-254-9628. Oct. 7 at 6:30.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND

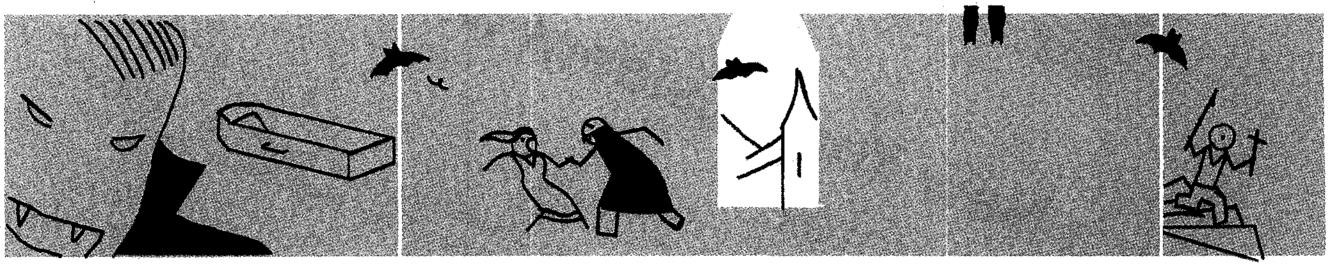
NEW YORKER FESTIVAL
The ninth annual gathering of contributors to the magazine takes place Oct. 3-5. Advance tickets to many events have sold out, but, as of press time, others are still available. A partial list follows. Oct. 4 at 1: The dancer Alexei Ratmansky talks with the critic Joan Acocella. (Cedar Lake Theatre, 547 W. 26th St.) ♦ Oct. 4 at 7:30: The filmmaker Guillermo del Toro discusses his work with the editor Daniel Zalewski. (Directors Guild of America, 110 W. 57th St.) ♦ Oct. 4 at 7:30: The critic Alex Ross interviews the soprano Dawn Upshaw. (Joan Weill Center for Dance, 405 W. 55th St.) Note: The festival includes a voter-registration drive at each of the events and at the festival's headquarters, at the Metropolitan Pavilion. (125 W. 18th St.) (For a complete schedule, and information about how to get tickets to all events, visit festival.newyorker.com.)

OPEN HOUSE NEW YORK
This annual event affords access to some two hundred sites of architectural and cultural significance. (Oct. 4-5. For details, visit www.ohny.org.)

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES
Swann, a leader in the field of African-American art, presents its first such auction of the season (Oct. 7). It features a strong group of Abstract Expressionist works, along with a painting by Ellis Wilson ("Machine Shop"), which was until recently on loan to Barack Obama, who kept it above his desk in his Senate office. (104 E. 25th St. 212-254-4710.) ♦ **Doyle's** sale of costume jewelry (Oct. 7) is colorful in more ways than one: among the lots are items from the collection of the New York socialite and Warholian "superstar" Brigid Berlin, famous for her "tit prints," among other things. Another group of pieces comes from the decidedly less outrageous philanthropist and interior-design entrepreneur Ann Getty and includes many of the big names in design—Karl Lagerfeld, Chanel, Miriam Haskell, and the like. (175 E. 87th St. 212-427-2730.) ♦ **Sotheby's** offers two mid-season sales, one of European furniture, ceramics, and tapestries (Oct. 3) and the other of Impressionist and modern art (Oct. 7). (York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.) ♦ Furniture and decorations abound at **Christie's,** which is holding its regular little-bit-of-everything sale known as Interiors (Oct. 3) followed by a more upmarket auction of European furniture, works of art, and tapestries (Oct. 7). (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.)

NEWYORKER.COM

Visit the Goings On blog, at www.newyorker.com/go/goingson, for additional cultural coverage and commentary.



LAURENT CILLUFFO

ON THE HORIZON

AUCTIONS
STRINGS ATTACHED
Oct. 10

Martin Guitar—a storied brand in the history of blues and rock—is a hundred and seventy-five years old, and Christie's is marking the anniversary by offering forty-nine of the company's guitars at its upcoming sale of musical instruments. (212-636-2000.)

MOVIES
POLAND, SPRUNG
Oct. 17-Nov. 13

The director Andrzej Wajda put Polish cinema on the international map with his great trilogy of films about the Second World War, "A Generation," "Kanal," and "Ashes and Diamonds." His diptych "Man of Marble" and "Man of Iron" captured the spirit of the Solidarity years. At age eighty-two, he is still active, having completed "Katyn" in 2007, and he will be on hand for the first weekend of Walter Reade's retrospective of his films. (212-875-5600.)

ART
BRONZE SAGE
Oct. 22-Jan. 26

Andrea Riccio (1470-1532), who was born in Padua and trained as a goldsmith before taking up bronze, was one of the greatest sculptors produced by the Renaissance—and also one of the least known. The Frick Collection will exhibit some forty magnificently detailed statuettes, reliefs, and decorative objects in the first monographic survey devoted to the Italian artist. (212-288-0700.)

THE THEATRE
FLAT BROKE
Oct. 23

Horton Foote's comedy "Dividing the Estate," about a complacent Southern family whose finances suddenly crumble, moves to the Booth in a Lincoln Center Theatre production after a well-received Off Broadway run last year, at 59E59. (212-239-6200.)

READINGS AND TALKS
LIGHT OF DAY
Oct. 30

On the eve of Halloween, Leslie S. Klinger, the author of "The New Annotated Dracula," visits the New York Public Library for a new look at Bram Stoker's classic vampire tale. (212-868-4444.)

Leslie S. Klinger discusses vampires, at the New York Public Library.

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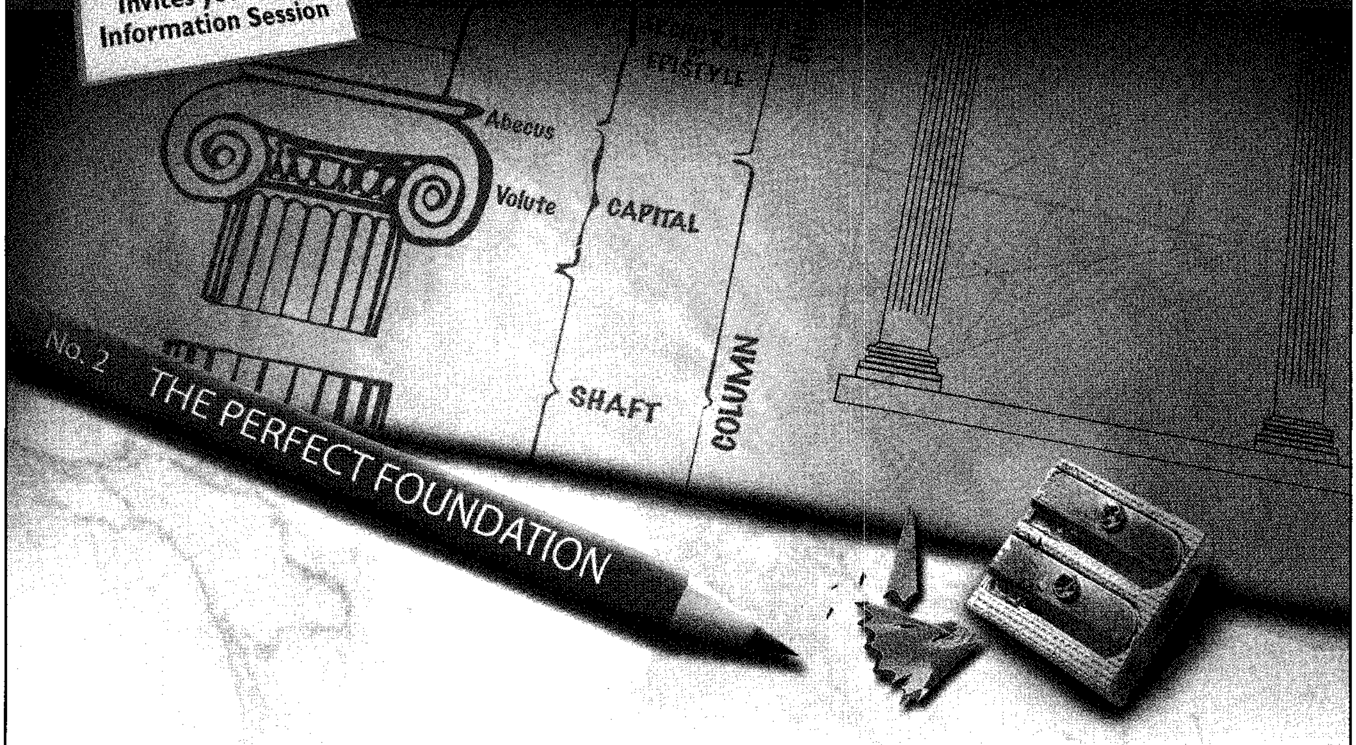

"I interrupted my college career nearly 30 years ago. And while I always planned on going back, life and career sidetracked my educational path. I had been looking for an inspiring program that would help me achieve my goals, and I found that and more at Columbia's School of General Studies.

"My motivation is much different now. It's not about my career or a misguided vocational focus like it was the first time around. It's about my intellectual evolution. I ran my family's furniture business, worked in finance, led various sales teams, and started a dotcom business. But in many ways, my education provides me with the greatest opportunity.

"I'm now an urban studies major specializing in architecture, and I love it. What's amazing is the curriculum, and how it has enabled me to take fascinating courses that have broadened my interests and passions. I'm not just going through the motions. I'm setting in motion an enlightened future for myself, and I couldn't be more satisfied."

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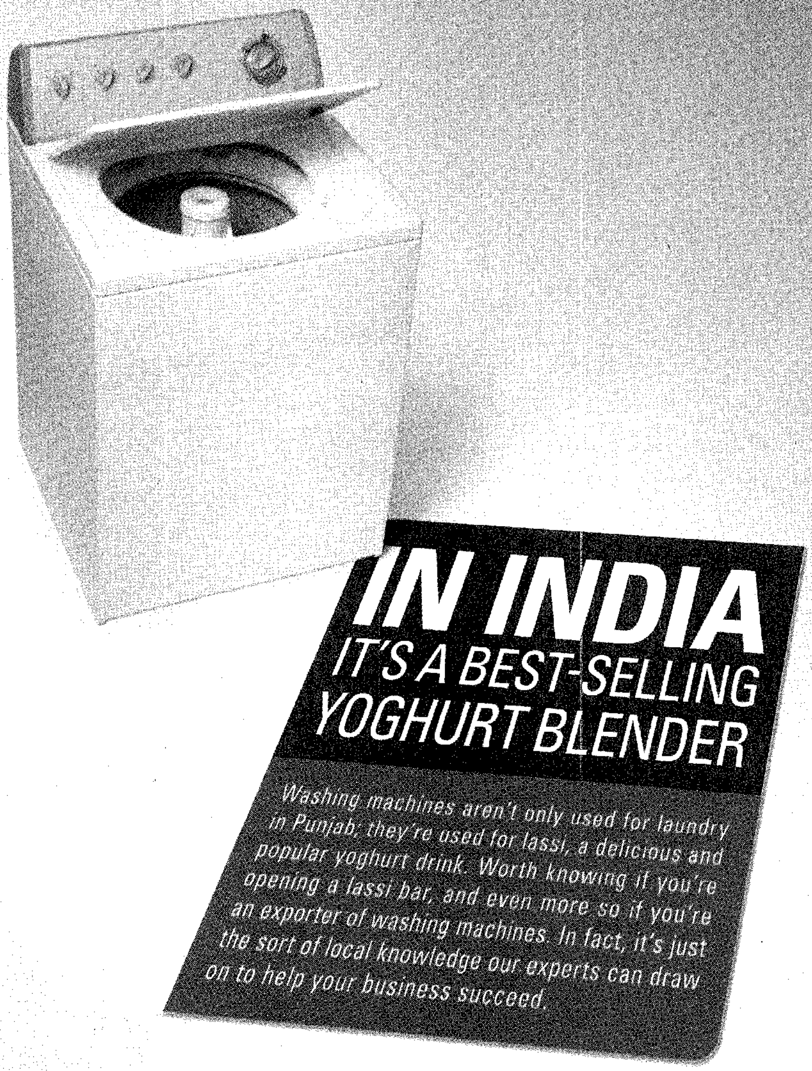

IN INDIA
IT'S A BEST-SELLING
YOGHURT BLENDER

Washing machines aren't only used for laundry in Punjab; they're used for lassi, a delicious and popular yoghurt drink. Worth knowing if you're opening a lassi bar, and even more so if you're an exporter of washing machines. In fact, it's just the sort of local knowledge our experts can draw on to help your business succeed.

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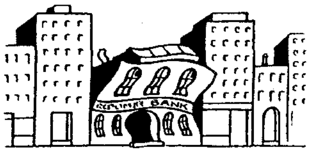
THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

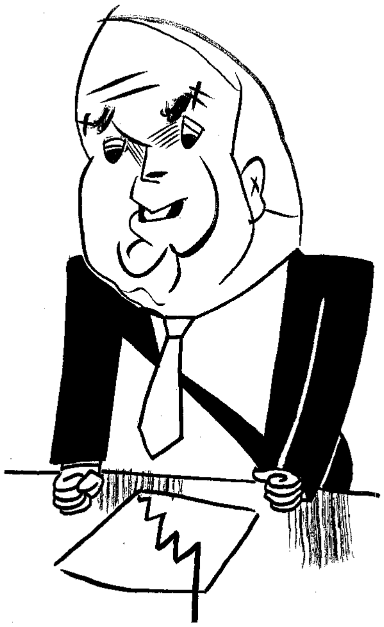
COMMENT
MONEY TALKS



In the latest episode of the financial drama "Credit Crunch," the President, the Presidential candidates, and congressional leaders from both parties gather in the White House to agree on a seven-hundred-billion-dollar bailout for the very financial firms whose greed and recklessness created the crisis. George W. Bush, perched between Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, is wearing a grim expression. Barack Obama also looks grave, but John McCain, who pretended to "suspend" his campaign before rushing back to Washington to help "solve" the crisis, is grinning broadly. Off camera, House Republican Leader John Boehner is threatening to sink the deal.

As political theatre ("If money isn't loosened up, this sucker could go down," Bush declared at one point in the White House meeting, according to the *Times*), the wrangling over the Wall Street rescue package is engrossing. As an exercise in crisis management, it is potentially disastrous—and, to the rest of the world, dumbfounding. Willem Buiter, an economist at the London School of Economics, who has served on the Bank of England's policymaking committee, said in a blog entry last Thursday that unless Congress acts now "the freeze of the financial wholesale markets will intensify and the attacks on financial institutions will resume, first in the U.S., then in the U.K., then in the rest of Europe and soon after everywhere in the financially connected world. . . . Instead of a mere recession, there will be a long and deep depression."

Some experts dispute the Bush-Buiter analysis. One school argues that the financial system is a mere "veil" wrapped around the rest of the economy. Strip it away and other business activities—the development and marketing of new products; families buying clothes and going out for meals—will go on unabated. If a bank that was performing a valuable function fails, another will spring up in its place.

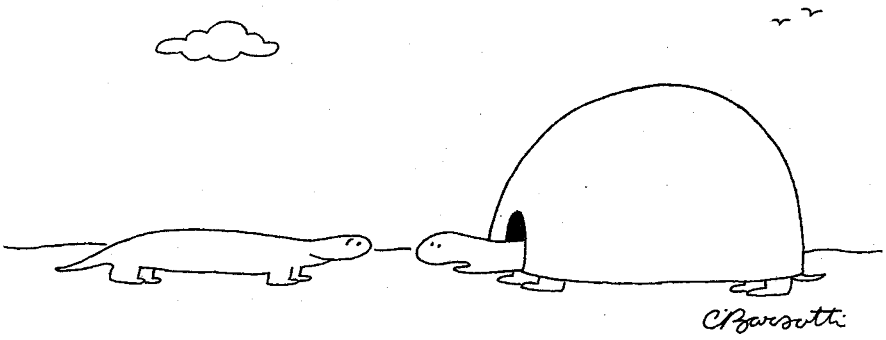


ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL

Boehner and his Republican colleagues, to judge from their attempts to block the bailout—which coincided with the failure of Washington Mutual, the biggest banking collapse in U.S. history—were apparently intent on organizing a natural experiment to test the veil theory. But they neglected to point out that their get-tough approach has been tried twice before: in the period from 1929-32, when Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon's advice to bankers burdened with bad loans was "liquidate, liquidate"; and just a few weeks ago, when Mellon's successor Henry Paulson and Federal Reserve chairman Ben Bernanke chose to let Lehman Brothers go bankrupt.

In the first instance, what followed was the Great Depression. In the second, it was outright panic in the markets. The cost of overnight borrowing jumped sharply, and the stocks of other financial firms, including Paulson's former employer, Goldman Sachs, plummeted. Worried that the entire financial system was about to break down, Paulson and Bernanke embarked on an embarrassing reversal, first agreeing to lend eighty-five billion dollars to A.I.G., the giant insurance company, then launching their controversial mortgage-purchase plan.

They had little choice. The big banks are so interconnected, and so important to the economy, that they can hold it ransom. A responsible government has to shore up a system in crisis using public money. The only question is on what terms this should be done. Paulson's first proposal was suspiciously vague and scan-



"Yes, it's nice, but it's lost twenty per cent of its value in the past year."

dalously arrogant. In addition to requesting authority from Congress for the Treasury to spend seven hundred billion dollars—about five per cent of the value of all home loans outstanding—on "mortgage-related assets," the draft legislation he circulated said that the Treasury Secretary's actions "may not be reviewed by any court of law or any administrative agency." After protests from all sides, negotiators from both parties in Congress and from the Treasury put together a much improved plan, under which the Treasury would be granted access to three hundred and fifty billion dollars, but with a strong oversight board and an independent Inspector General monitoring its actions, and with the Government Accountability Office reviewing them. Access to the remaining three hundred and fifty billion would be contingent on a vote in Congress.

The revised plan almost certainly wouldn't turn the economy around by itself, but it could help, and some of the objections that have been raised to it are misleading. Ultimately, it is likely to cost a lot less than seven hundred billion dollars. The government, in return for its outlays, will obtain ownership of securities tied to the mortgages of millions of American homeowners. Some, perhaps most, of these lenders will end up defaulting, but that is already figured into the depressed price of the securities. As long as the Treasury Department refuses to pay more than fair value, it should recoup most of its investment. Of course, nobody knows exactly what the securities are worth. But, in return for the Treasury Department's stepping in and taking on risk, the revised plan requires that the government get "equity sharing"—i.e., the right to buy stocks at a fixed price in the seller bank. If the credit crisis is eventually resolved and investors bid the stocks up again, taxpayers will benefit.

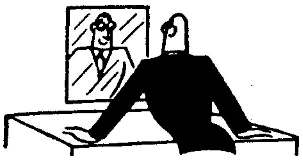
Some economists believe that the government should rescue troubled banks directly, by buying special issues of preference shares. Others propose making the banks fix themselves, by suspending dividend payments and issuing new stock—or even forcing them into bankruptcy courts, where they would have to swap debt for equity. If things don't improve, Paulson and Bernanke will probably end up adopting some or all of these policies in addition to the asset purchase. Paulson is a practical Midwesterner; Bernanke is a leading expert on the Great Depression. Both men rightly believe that the middle of a financial crisis is no time for ideological inflexibility.

Or for political posturing. On the afternoon of the White House meeting, three Republican congressmen with links to John McCain—Eric Cantor, of Virginia; Jeb Hensarling, of Texas; and Paul Ryan, of Wisconsin—presented a list of conditions that they wanted to be considered in any bipartisan deal, including a privately funded insurance plan for mortgage securities. Such plans would, at best, have a marginal impact on the bank-insolvency problem. (They already exist; A.I.G. was one of their big marketers.) McCain reportedly spoke with House Republican lawmakers before the meeting. When Boehner presented the new proposal, the negotiations collapsed. Did this mean that the G.O.P. had split into two factions on the biggest economic crisis in decades? Or was it, as some Democrats suspect, a mere ruse, designed to give McCain an opportunity to emerge as the savior of an eventual deal?

All we know for sure is that McCain refused to commit either way on the revised plan, or on the House Republicans' plan, and, according to reports, said next to nothing during the White House meeting. On Friday, despite his earlier proclamations that he wouldn't leave town until an agreement was struck, he flew to Mississippi for the first Presidential debate, in which he expressed sympathy for the House Republicans, said that he hoped he would be able to vote for a bailout, and repeatedly vowed to "cut spending." If this is any indication of how a potential McCain Administration would handle a banking crisis, now may be the time to start buying gold and stashing cash under the mattress.

—*John Cassidy*

FINANCE DEPT.
GOLDMAN TRUST



Last Thursday evening, around the time the Treasury Secretary and former Goldman Sachs chief executive Henry Paulson was down on one knee, begging the congressional leadership not to scuttle his seven-hundred-billion-dollar bailout plan, Lloyd Blankfein, his successor at Goldman, was hosting a private reception at the Public Library for several hundred of Paulson's fellow Goldman alumni. Goldman does this every year, to celebrate and strengthen the diaspora's spiritual and commercial bonds. The guests were private equity and hedge-fund managers, from some of the biggest shops in the business, and, whatever violence had befallen their portfolios in the preceding weeks, these men—and they were mostly men, in suits—could probably have passed the hat and pooled a sum large enough to rescue, say, Washington Mutual and a bank to be named later. Blankfein stood to address them, asking, with some mirth, "How was your week?"

His, as everyone present well knew, had been long—if not quite as long as Paulson's. On Sunday, Goldman, along with Morgan Stanley, had announced that it was changing its status from an investment bank to a more traditional bank holding company, with depositors, and all the benefits and strictures that come with them. It may have done so in anticipation of new regulations, choosing to do to itself what the Feds would likely have forced it to do anyway, and in recognition that its business model (borrow short, borrow long, borrow too much) would no longer fly, in a world of tightening credit and declining asset values. It had done so, as well, in desperation. Its stock had been hammered; the market was in a panic. Although it isn't clear how perilous Goldman's predicament really was (an editors' note in the *Times* last week parsed the paper's use of the word "ailing," concluding that " 'embattled' would have been a more accurate headline description of Goldman's state"), the firm, to heal or reinforce itself, had essentially given up being an investment bank. It would no longer be your father's Goldman, the one your mother dreamed that you'd work for, even if she said she didn't. Instead, it would be a Goldman that might give your mother a free toaster in exchange for her opening a checking account. This was a shocking surrender—the end of Wall Street, as some would have it, and the beginning of who knows what. It was as if the Yankees had announced that they were becoming the Twins.

Still, in this season's assortment of spectacular falls from grace, Goldman's was as graceful as one could be, a reflection of the firm's relative well-being and its time-honored tactical skill (and not just of systemic collapse and speculator hubris). And so it was reasonable for Blankfein, addressing a roomful of former Goldman stars, to project measured optimism and to summon up, as support for it, the firm's "people" and its "culture," which is widely admired, although nowhere quite as highly as at the firm itself. They, the alumni, were proof of it. Blankfein noted the ubiquity of ex-Goldmanites in Washington—at the Treasury, in the White House—and in foreign governments and various other august institutions. (He neglected to mention Charlie Haas, the Goldman broker turned professional wrestler.) This well-placed array, which outsiders might mistake for evidence of conspiracy or conflicted interest, was, in Blankfein's rendering, a reassurance that a familiar kind of character and competence would have a hand in whatever was to come. There was also some solace in the deeper travails (bankruptcy, absorption) of some of Goldman's competitors: market share.

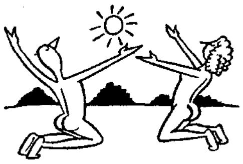
Earlier in the week, Warren Buffett had invested five billion dollars in Goldman. He had got good terms, as he usually does, which led some commentators to suggest that Goldman had, in effect, given up too much for Buffett's infusion of cash. Blankfein, at the library, recalled a comment a client had made to him in a meeting earlier that day: "You sure paid a lot for that five billion." Blankfein said, "Well, we paid a lot less than if we'd gotten it from someone else, like from you." With "you," he pointed in jest to a man standing in the front row: Jon Corzine, another alumnus, Paulson's predecessor as C.E.O., and now the governor of New Jersey. Blankfein presumably meant the government, whose corporate bailouts have tended to lead to equity ruination, rather than mere dilution.

Corzine took the microphone, made a joke about getting out of Trenton, and expressed his own confidence that Goldman, whatever its latest mutation, would thrive. When he was done, Blankfein announced that he had a gift for Corzine.

"As long as it cost less than twenty-five dollars," Corzine said. It probably did. It was a toaster, emblazoned with the Goldman Sachs logo. It should get a good laugh at the statehouse in Trenton.

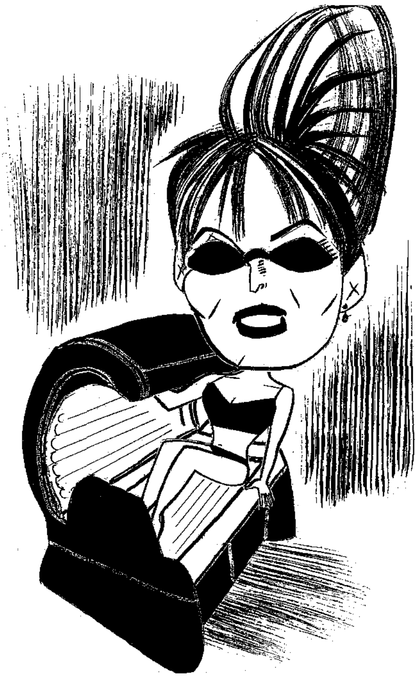
—*Nick Paumgarten*

COCONUT OIL DEPT.
ALASKAN TROPIC



Of the many things revealed about the Alaska governor Sarah Palin since she became John McCain's running mate last month, one of the most curious is the fact, reported two weeks ago, that she had a tanning bed installed in the state mansion in Juneau. Obama supporters seized on the news, arguing that private tanning-bed ownership is evidence that Palin isn't the folksy hockey mom she claims to be, while Republican partisans pointed out that she bought the bed secondhand from an athletic club, and, moreover, that tanning is a reasonable activity, given Alaska's sun-deprived winters.

Taking a charitable view of the revelation was the Indoor Tanning Association, a trade lobbying group based in Washington, D.C. The organization quickly issued a press release extolling tanning as a source of Vitamin D and gave "kudos" to Palin for standing up to those "trying to frighten Americans away from UV light." Palin hasn't commented publicly on her bronzing habits, but tanning professionals are nevertheless excited that an avowed tanner is so prominent on the national stage. "Word flew through our industry," Dan Humiston, the association's president, said the other day by phone. "They're all saying, 'Good news about Sarah Palin.' "



Sarah Palin

Humiston was speaking from Nashville, where he was attending the association's annual trade show. The three-day expo features workshops ("Total Salon Makeover: Saving and Rebuilding a Tanning Business on the Brink"), new products (the CosmoLux 9K90 low-pressure sunlamp), and, occasionally, themed entertainment. "Most tanning salons are owned by females," Humiston said. "If we have a band, we'll bring in someone for them to get up and dance. The Beach Boys gave a concert once."

In 1985, Humiston borrowed four thousand dollars from his grandparents, bought two tanning beds, and opened a salon in the basement of an office building in a Buffalo suburb. Now, at forty-five, he's the president of Tanning Bed, Inc., a chain with thirty-four locations across upstate New York. Humiston, who appears two shades darker than everyone else in photographs, normally adheres to a regimen of fifteen minutes a week under the lights, but lately he's been too busy to bronze—he's running for Congress as an independent in the Twenty-seventh Congressional District. "We were at the pool the other day, and my kids were like, 'Dad, you got a farmer tan,'" Humiston said. "I call it the parade tan—my head and arms were tan but my legs were pale." He added, solemnly, "I'm as fair-skinned as I've been in a long time."

There's something of a history of tanned politicians—think of Ronald Reagan on his California ranch, his skin as singed-looking as the needle grass, or, more recently, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, who, like Palin, has been known to stay artificially golden. "I thought she had a healthy glow, even before I knew she was a tanner," Humiston said. "What I love about it is she's like a normal person. There's nothing fancy about it. She bought an old tanning bed and put it in her house in Alaska because they don't get any sun. She's probably stressed out, goes and lies in a tanning bed for twenty minutes, and relaxes." Humiston added, "When you're governor, it's probably tough to go wandering into a tanning salon in sweatpants and a T-shirt."

Much of the I.T.A.'s energy is spent clearing up misconceptions about indoor tanning perpetuated by what I.T.A. officials call "the sun-scare industry." Last year, a bill was introduced in California that would, among other things, ban anyone under sixteen from using a tanning bed. "The sun doesn't have a P.R. firm to say, 'Hang on a minute, they're misleading you,' " Humiston said. Of McCain's melanomas, he said, "I suspect during the time he was held captive in Southeast Asia there were occasions when he was exposed to intense sun."

One wonders if a Palin Vice-Presidency would result in an indoor-tanning renaissance, or mark a period of industry deregulation. Humiston says he wouldn't lobby Palin on his colleagues' behalf ("That would be below her pay grade"). Nor does he plan to introduce pro-tanning legislation if he's elected to Congress this fall, although, he said, "If there was ever a question in the legislative body about indoor tanning or UV light, I'm sure I'd be the person that would be called upon."

—Steven Kurutz

NETWORKING "IN" CROWD

"I have a theory that life is junior high," Tom Brokaw said last week, roaming the stage of the Metropolitan Ballroom at the Sheraton. "Everybody's trying to get to the right tables, hang out with the right crowd, say the right things, and emerge saying they're part of the 'in' group." He was speaking to perhaps the world's ultimate "in" group, an audience of C.E.O.s, celebrities, and heads of state assembled for the fourth annual Clinton Global Initiative, and yet he seemed intent on demonstrating the hierarchical subtleties of name-dropping. He began coaxing his fellow-panelists to the platform for a discussion of energy policy: among them Shimon Peres ("my friend"), T. Boone Pickens ("I like to be able to order around Texas moguls"), the Danish politician Helle Thorning-Schmidt ("in that remarkably small country"), and Gavin Newsom ("I'll have to overlook him—I have a daughter and a son-in-law and a granddaughter living in San Francisco, and I don't want their property taxes to go up").

Brokaw was wearing a yellow Livestrong bracelet on his right wrist, which connected him, of course, to Lance Armstrong, who, the day before, on the same stage, had referred to "my good friend Bono," who in turn gave a shout-out to "this great man, Muhammad Ali," and then impersonated his pal Warren Buffett. (He drew polite laughter by adopting a Midwestern twang: "'Don't appeal to the conscience of America. Appeal to the greatness of America, and I think you'll get the job done.'") Backstage, we learned from the Jordanian Queen Rania al-Abdullah's *Slate* diary, Armstrong and the Queen had "exchanged notes on the joys and aches of running." And so the C.G.I. resembled a live-action Facebook network (Illuminati, Class of 2008), complete with status updates (John McCain: "As of this morning I am suspending my campaign") and declarations of shared interests (Armstrong: "I happen to be a real fan of magnolia trees, and I found out that so is the President").

Across town, at the Council on Foreign Relations, mutual assured camaraderie reigned as well. The Russian foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, responded to a question about Iran from the veteran U.N. correspondent Evelyn Leopold by asking, "Do you still smoke?" Then he said, "I talked to Henry Kissinger this morning"—who presumably was still marvelling over his photo-op initiation of Sarah Palin into the global élite. Think of the Council, with its smaller numbers and its old-school mores, as something more akin to Friendster. C.G.I. had Drew Barrymore and Ashley Judd; the C.F.R. had Michael Douglas, who sat quietly near the back during President Álvaro Uribe's talk about improved investment opportunities in Colombia. Afterward, spying the nametag of Shannon K. O'Neil, a Council Fellow for Latin-American Studies, Uribe blurted out, "Tip O'Neill! Was a great senator from Massachusetts." (Congressman, but close enough.)

Gold-digging on the part of foreign leaders is a perennial pastime here in late September, when the United Nations General Assembly—UNGA, to the "in" crowd—convenes, but the preponderance of Lehman Brothers, Goldman Sachs, and Morgan Stanley affiliations among the Council R.S.V.P.s served as a reminder that New York may no longer be prime prospecting territory. The Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's predictable rants about the "end of an American empire," at a Grand Hyatt breakfast on Thursday, might ordinarily have confined him to the Wingnut group headed by Hugo Chávez, the President of Venezuela. But there, at the Council clubhouse on East Sixty-eighth Street, was President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, of Argentina, citing "the failure of the neoliberal experiment," without public objection from the gray suits, while the chairman of Coca-Cola, Neville Isdell, cautioned Clinton et al. at the Sheraton, "The epicenter of the world economy is starting to move in a different direction, moving out of the West." Viktor Yushchenko boasted that Ukraine would be co-hosting the European soccer finals in 2012. "It has never taken place this far east," he said, and later added, "In April of 1710, the hetman of Ukraine wrote the first constitution, which was, I believe, seventy years earlier than the American Constitution. . . . I know, I know, it's a sensitive point."

"You sense more than a little bit of schadenfreude that the Americans, who for years were preaching about the need for this or that market reform, obviously have hit hard times," the C.F.R. president, Richard Haass, said, after hosting his tenth confab of the week. "I couldn't believe an Argentine was telling us about debt management," one Council member said. But in this junior high the shrimps were cautiously circling the bully.

—*Ben McGrath*

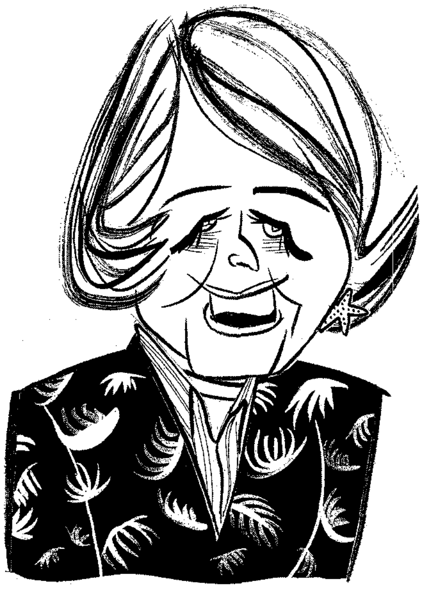
NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH
AMBASSADOR LIZ

Wall Street, the spiritual (if not, these days, the actual) home of finance, and the Upper East Side, where many financiers live, maintain a special relationship, perhaps akin to that of Britain and America, or—more recently—to that of co-dependents, who thrive or founder in tandem, and are quick to make excuses for each other's shortcomings and missteps. Fortunes made downtown become uptown apartments. A.I.G.'s former chief executive Robert Willumstad has property on Park Avenue, as do John Thain, of Merrill Lynch, his predecessor Stanley O'Neal, and Richard Fuld, the head of Lehman Brothers, who, last year, paid twenty-one million dollars for a spread at No. 640. Think of the districts as poles on the globe of Manhattan society, termini of a gilded corridor, the hefty expanses on either end of a barbell-shaped territory—the connective bit is the No. 4/5 train—of the mind. The sudden lightening of Wall Street has led to wondering, and worries, about who will hold up the other side.

So, while Wall Street was calling on its sagest analysts, the Upper East Side enlisted one of its own—Liz Smith, the self-proclaimed "two-thousand-year-old gossip columnist" for the *Post*, who, Monday night, appeared at a benefit dinner for the preservationist organization Friends of the Upper East Side Historic Districts, which was making her an honorary ambassador to the neighborhood. At five o'clock, Smith welcomed a visitor to her apartment at Thirty-eighth and Third—ride-over country—and said that, while many of her friends to the north were fretting over their net worths, the crisis hadn't affected her personally. "All of my money is in Treasury bonds," she said, settling into the sofa. (Needlepoint throw pillow: "I DON'T REPEAT GOSSIP—SO LISTEN CAREFULLY.") "I'm one of the rare people who didn't make any money in the stock-market boom, so I didn't lose any, either."

Smith, who was wearing a blue-striped button-down, creased tan slacks, and a vivid application of peachy lipstick, arrived in New York in 1949 with fifty dollars and a degree in journalism from the University of Texas. (She had become Liz several years earlier. "My first husband gave me that name," she said. "He said, 'I can't be sleeping with someone called Mary Elizabeth.' ") "We were all starving to death," she said. "Every Saturday, we'd go to a restaurant called À la Fourchette and have a Dover-sole lunch for a dollar and a quarter."

A nostalgist of the best sort, Smith is wry and engaging about her life's adventures—"The most fabulous thing that ever happened to me was travelling with Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor at the height of their scandal"—while resisting the urge to long for a past that never was, or a future that probably won't be, thank you very much. "I was born six years before the stock-market crash," she said. "I lived through one Depression, and, actuarially, I'm probably going to check out during another."



Liz Smith

In the spirit of lean times, Smith has recently been divesting herself of unnecessary junk: files, books, faxes, letters, five Rolodexes ("I need to go through them and throw out all the dead people"), but not, apparently, several ancient-looking spelling-cue Post-its stuck to a wall: "Giuliani," "Zellweger," "McConaughey," "Al-Qaeda." Opening a hall closet filled with boots—pink, silver, red snakeskin—she said, "I just gave away my white ones from Ivana Trump." A few minutes later, she cracked open another door. "This, as you'll see," she said, "is another room full of crap."

Eventually, it was time for Ambassador Smith to head to the Upper East Side. She changed into a bright-green jacket with palm-leaf appliqués, clipped on some coral-and-rhinestone starfish-shaped earrings, and took the elevator down to meet a waiting black car. "Oh, God, *this* is posh," she said as the car pulled up outside a private club on Park Avenue.

There were cocktails, and then lobster ravioli—painted with brown stripes, like a Henri Bendel bag—filet mignon, and lots of talk about the sad thing that had happened on Wall Street and what it would mean for Upper East Siders. The emerging consensus was that it would be gruesome, but perhaps, from a preservationist's perspective, a disguised blessing. "As much as we worry about our funding and our neighbors' financial health, sometimes these valleys in the economy can actually save the livability of a neighborhood," Seri Worden, the executive director of the Friends group, said later, which was another way of putting what an Eighty-fourth Streeter had asserted to her dinner partner: "There won't be another building built in New York for the next decade."

During the dessert course, Smith took the podium. She talked about some of her favorite Upper East Side hangouts: Le Cirque, Donohue's, Neil's Coffee Shop. "I love to go to Sette Mezzo, as long as someone else is picking up the check," she said.

It seemed a very Wall Street sentiment.

—*Lauren Collins*

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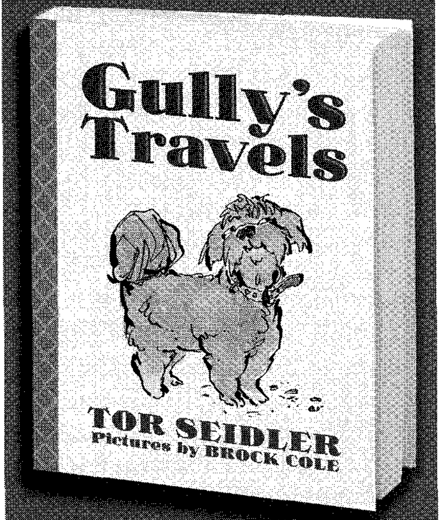

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THE POLITICAL SCENE

THE APPALACHIAN PROBLEM

Obama goes to rural Virginia.

BY PETER J. BOYER

Barack Obama's September 9th trip to Lebanon, Virginia, in the southwestern hill country, came at a moment of deep unease among Democrats. John McCain's selection of Sarah Palin as his running mate, eleven days earlier, had yielded rich results, in Republican enthusiasm and in polling numbers. Several polls showed McCain pulling ahead of Obama, and some Democrats worried that Obama's slogan of "Change" was a frail substitute for an emphatic message spelling out just what change he hoped to bring about. It seemed that the Obama camp had been knocked off balance by the Palin factor. Some Democrats feared that Obama himself—cool, cerebral, aloof—was a problem, reflected by the campaign's apparent inability to counter McCain's bold communications strategy effectively. Most disturbing, polling revealed that voters were increasingly inclined to trust McCain on the economy—an issue on which the Democrat should have the advantage.

If Obama was feeling deflated, he did not show it when he bounded onto the stage that afternoon in the Lebanon High School gymnasium. The crowd of about two thousand had been warmed up by Cecil Roberts, the fire-breathing president of the United Mine Workers of America (who offered the observation, which was making the rounds that week, that "Jesus was a community organizer"). Obama, shedding his suit jacket and rolling up his shirtsleeves, worked the crowd hard for more than an hour. He joked about the hubbub surrounding McCain's choice of running mate ("I've been to forty-nine states now. The only one I haven't been to is Alaska, and I realize now that maybe I should have gone up there"), and then began a performance that was as populist in theme and as personal in style as a Harvard lawyer could credibly deliver. He portrayed an America that had lost its dream, becoming a nation whose people stood in unemployment lines as their homes were being foreclosed on. He decried C.E.O.s who "give themselves million-dollar bonuses, even as they're closing down a plant." And he portrayed John McCain as being hopelessly out of touch.

"I don't think John McCain is a bad man," Obama said. "I just think that he doesn't get it. I just think that he doesn't understand what the American people are going through right now." Obama attacked Republicans for their trickle-down economic theories, and McCain for buying into them. "They call it the ownership society in Washington," he said. "What they really mean is, You're on your own. Your plant closes up and you lose your job, you're on your own. You're sailing along, trying to look after your kids, if you want to go back to college, you're on your own. You're a poor kid, lift yourself up by your bootstraps, you're on your own. . . . Now, I guess if you think that somebody making four million dollars is still middle class, maybe you think it's worked. But if you're like an ordinary person, making thirty or forty or fifty thousand dollars, then you realize how tough things are. And that's why I'm running for President, because that's what I come from, that's where I've been."

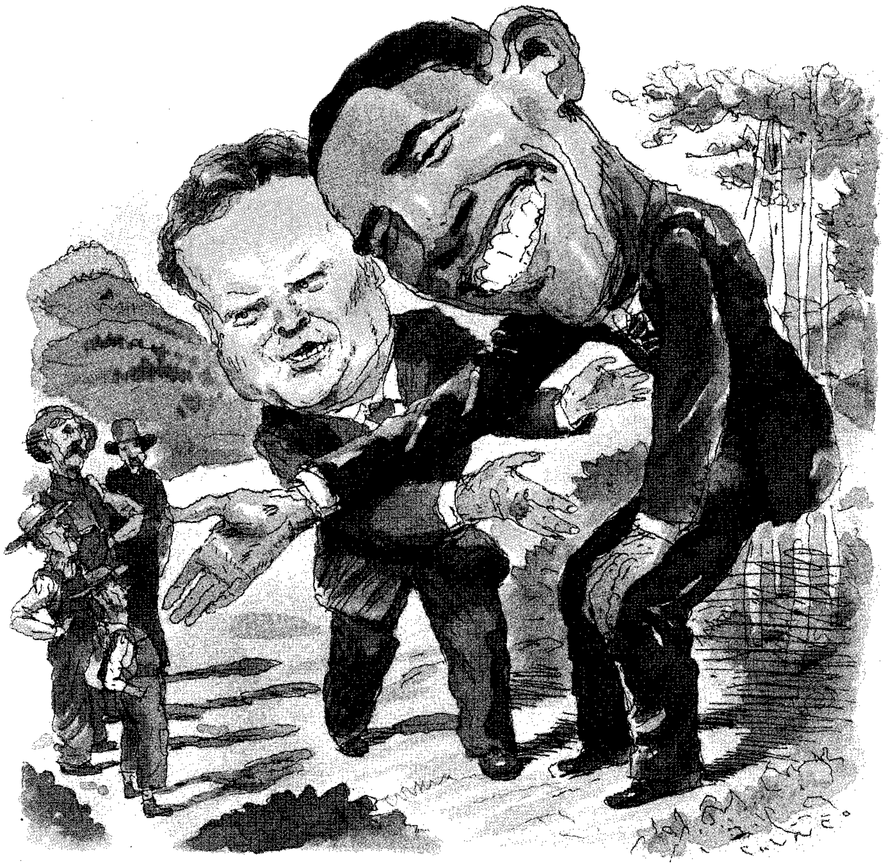
Obama spoke of his mother, a single mom who "had to take out food stamps a couple of times, just to make sure we had enough to eat." He wondered why "Iraq has a seventy-nine-billion-dollar surplus that they've parked in banks in New York, drawin' interest" while Americans were wanting. "That is gonna change under an Obama Administration," he vowed, to loud cheers. "I want to spend that money right here in the United States."

In a nod to local values, Obama declared, "I'm a Christian and I believe deeply in my faith," and he volunteered the information that he was no gun grabber. "I just want to be absolutely clear, all right? So I don't want any misunderstanding, so that when we all go home and you're talking to your buddies, and they say, 'Aw, he wants to take my gun away,' you heard it here.... I believe in the Second Amendment. I believe in people's lawful right to bear arms. I will not take your shotgun away from you. I will not take your rifle away. I won't take your handgun away." Obama said he was for "common-sense gun-safety laws," and repeated again, "I am not gonna take your guns away. So, if you wanna find an excuse not to vote for me, don't use that one, because that just ain't true. It just ain't true!"

In all, it was an inspired performance, which concluded to cascading cheers. But it was for a largely partisan crowd, which had come to the event already convinced, and it was hard to guess how it would play outside that gym. Although the regional media outlets gave the event a lot of coverage, it turned out that Obama's Virginia début as a rousing populist was hardly noticed nationally, having been overwhelmed by the kind of controversy that has come to characterize this campaign. During his talk, Obama had slipped into a colloquial style (not his strength), and at one point he decided to drive home a point with a down-home aphorism. The McCain-Palin claim as change agents, he said, was false. "You can put lipstick on a pig," Obama said, to the delight of the crowd. "It's still a pig."

When Obama finally secured Hillary Clinton's capitulation in the Democratic primary race, in June, the first place he took his campaign was Bristol, Virginia, also in the state's far southwestern corner. Although Virginia likes to be known as the Mother of Presidents, having produced eight, for generations the Old Dominion has been so reliably Republican in Presidential general elections that its vote was scarcely worth contesting. Except for 1964, when the Texan Lyndon Johnson prevailed, Virginia has not voted Democratic since 1948, resisting even the Democrats' all-Bubba ticket in 1992 and 1996. This year, after Obama and Clinton emerged from the February 5th Super Tuesday vote virtually deadlocked, Obama went on to sweep the "Potomac primaries" (Virginia, Maryland, and Washington, D.C.) the following week. In Virginia, he far surpassed expectations, taking ten of the state's eleven congressional districts, and beating Clinton over all by a twenty-nine-point margin.

JOHN CUNEO



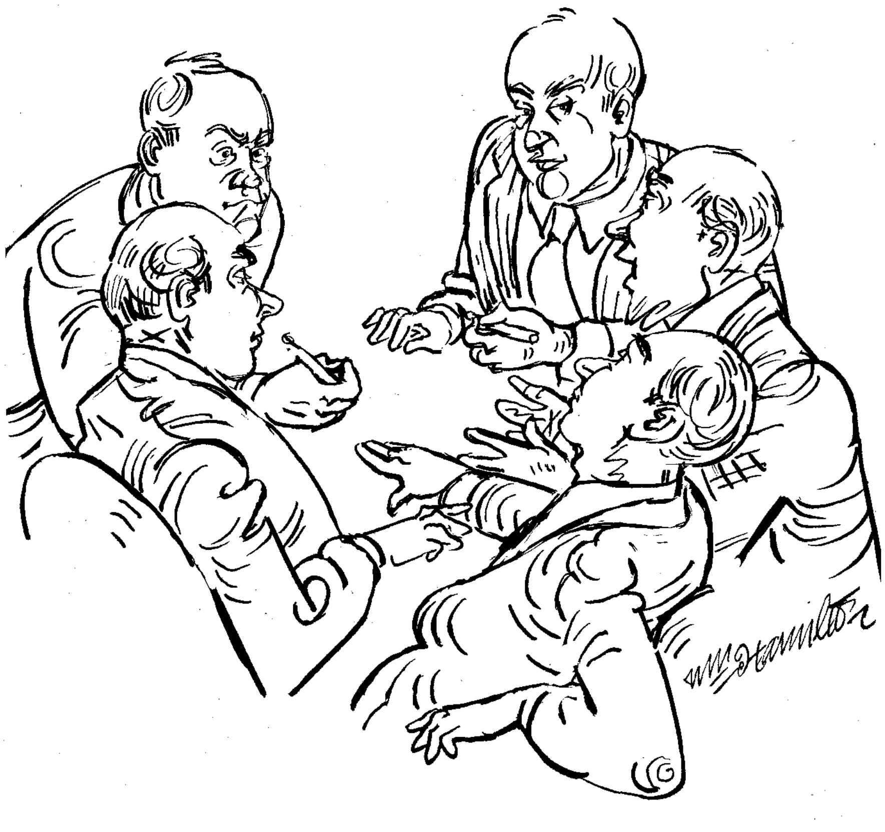
Will Jim Webb's Scots-Irish populism work for Obama in the hill country?

That showing aroused Democratic hopes that Virginia might finally back a Democratic Presidential nominee in the general election. The state would be a prize, delivering more electoral votes (thirteen) than all but eleven other states. As Washington's expanding suburbs have reached farther into farmland and horse country, accommodating a well-educated workforce of government and tech-industry employees, northern Virginia has grown bluer and more politically influential. Virginia has elected successive Democratic governors, and in 2006 the Democrat Jim Webb unseated the formidable Senator George Allen, who was considered a favorite among potential Republican Presidential contenders. So tempting is Virginia to Obama that he seriously considered both Webb and Governor Tim Kaine as his running mate; another Virginia Democrat, the former governor Mark Warner, would likely have made the list as well, but for his campaign (in which he is heavily favored) to win the Senate seat of the Republican John Warner, who is retiring.

Virginia Democrats knew, however, that, impressive as Obama's primary victory was, the most notable result from that day's voting might have come in the only district he lost—the Virginia ninth, which includes Lebanon. The rout there—by thirty-two points—had troubling implications for Obama's chances in Virginia as a whole, and beyond. The southwestern region, rising from the Roanoke Valley up to the Appalachian Plateau, is a place of small farms, coal mines, and chronic economic hard times. It was settled in the eighteenth century by Scots-Irish Calvinists who fled Anglican-dominated Ulster and, eventually, came to that portion of Virginia which the planter aristocracy didn't want. Their descendants live in small hill towns that are nearer, in mileage and in spirit, to the old factory town of Ironton, Ohio, than to the glass office towers of northern Virginia. Three weeks after the Virginia primary, the mostly white, working-class voters of southern Ohio, a significant portion of them of Scots-Irish descent, helped deliver that state to Hillary Clinton. In the next weeks, their kin did the same in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Indiana, and Kentucky. It became clear that if Obama hoped to win in November he would probably have to overcome his Appalachia problem.

In May, Tim Kaine, Obama's national co-chairman, wrote a memorandum to the candidate, urging him not to write off southwestern Virginia; if the region votes against Obama in the general election by the same margins it did in the Democratic primary, John McCain will almost certainly win the state. "I said, first, don't assume that Hillary Clinton really racking up a margin there means that you're just not going to do well," Kaine told me recently. Kaine explained to Obama that the hill people were skeptics, but could be convinced. "Presence really matters," Kaine says he told Obama. "They're not used to seeing somebody come by and ask for their vote in a Presidential campaign. And my thought was, If you go, and show 'em that you're really interested, and they get a chance to see you more up close and personal than in a TV ad, a little bit of presence might go a long way in that part of the state."

After Obama's appearance, I left Lebanon and drove into the Shenandoah Valley, to Roanoke, for a visit with a man who has made a profession of selling Democrats to rural Virginians. David (Mudcat) Saunders has been called the Democrats' "Bubba coordinator," the embodiment of the Party's faint but growing recognition that its alienation of rural white men is both unnecessary and costly. Saunders, who is fifty-nine, is an exaggerated version of an élitist liberal's caricature of a Southern redneck. His face fixed in a wicked grin, he happily proclaims his love for Jesus and guns, college football and bluegrass music, and the Democratic Party. He smokes Camels, and is prolifically profane. Saunders is a member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, and can provide details of his great-grandfather's wounding at the Battle of Seven Pines, in Henrico County, while serving in General James L. Kemper's brigade. He sleeps under a Rebel-flag quilt, and when challenged on such matters he has invited his inquisitors to "kiss my Rebel ass"—his way of making the point that when Democrats are drawn into culture battles by prissy liberal sensitivities they usually lose the larger war.



"God damn it, Kimball—for us, Main Street is Wall Street."

In 2006, Saunders served as a personal adviser to Jim Webb in his Senate run against the incumbent (and former governor) George Allen. Social conservatives had put on the ballot a measure banning gay marriage, a familiar ploy intended to drive up Republican turnout. When a coalition opposing the measure asked Saunders to volunteer for its side, he said that he would do so if the coalition agreed not to censor his message to the press. It agreed. "In my first interview, I said, This has nothing to do with queers getting married, this has to do with politics," Saunders recalled. "This has to do with drivin' up George Allen's numbers. It has to do with dividing God's children. The one thing people better understand is God loves every queer every bit as much as he loves any Republican. It's about individual rights." The gay-marriage ban passed, but its opponents won more than forty per cent of the vote—a victory in the margins—and Webb won his seat.

Mike Murphy, a Republican strategist who has worked for McCain, has called Saunders's approach "one-third true, two-thirds hokum," but Saunders's methods have proven merit. In 2001, in his first full-time foray into politics, Saunders worked on the Democratic gubernatorial campaign of Mark Warner, who had an uphill climb in rural Virginia. Warner, who was born in Indiana and reared in Connecticut and Illinois, was a cellular-telephone mogul based in northern Virginia, and, therefore, culturally suspect in the southwest. At the time, Republicans held the statehouse and the governor's chair, but Virginia was stuck in a budget crisis. Saunders believed that if Warner could break through the cultural barriers rural Virginians would respond favorably to his message of competent governance. Warner made dozens of visits to the region, and Saunders worked out a deal that put Warner's name on a truck running on the Nascar circuit. One morning in the shower, Saunders decided that Warner needed a bluegrass campaign jingle. He composed lyrics on the spot, and put them to the tune of the Dillards' song "Dooley":

Mark Warner is ready
To lead our Commonwealth.
He'll work for mountain people
And economic health!

Get ready to shout it
From the coal mines to the stills
Here comes Mark Warner—
The hero of the hills!

The jingle became a small sensation during the campaign, and Warner won fifty-two per cent of the vote in the southwestern district. In office, Warner repaid the region by persuading two high-tech companies to move to Lebanon, and fought to get Virginia Tech—Virginia Polytechnic Institute, in the Blue Ridge town of Blacksburg—into the Atlantic Coast Conference. "Mark Warner has become part of the culture," Saunders says. "We accept him as part of who we are, if for no other reason—God damn, he got V.P.I. into the A.C.C.! I mean, it's a big damned deal."

Saunders worked as a senior strategist in John Edwards's Presidential campaign, and is now following Obama's with a critical eye. He worries that Obama seems too professorial, too detached, to make headway with rural voters. "I never thought I would see Hillary Clinton being defined as pro-gun and anti-trade, and a black guy being considered an élitist down here."

Obama's "Change" message, Saunders argues, is too abstract, too vague, for the region. "Those people you were with today were screwed by the English in Scotland and Ireland way before they came over here and started getting screwed," he said. "They've been screwed since the dawn of time. And you know what? You ain't gonna do anything with them, talkin' about change. You know why? We're all changed out. That's all you ever hear, every election. Somebody's gonna change some shit. Nothin' ever changes. We get fucked."

Saunders was eager to hear about the distinctly populist message Obama had delivered in Lebanon, but when I mentioned the "lipstick on a pig" line he stopped grinning. "That quote might come back to burn his ass *up*," Saunders mused. "Using the word 'pig' . . ."

If John Edwards were the nominee, he would certainly be pounding home the greed message. That message, Saunders said, "would be beatin' the hell outta John McCain right now." He went on, "And the reason is, is because John said, Enforce the antitrust laws that have decimated us. He said we're gonna make the playing field level, that the American workers are the most productive workers in the world still—let's put 'em back to work. We've traded local economies for Wall Street dividends. That's all that's happened. Since the dawn of time, the big sons of bitches kicked the little sons of bitches' ass. And that's what's happenin' now. I mean, it's a time to fight. I mean, anybody who doesn't think we have a problem with economic disparity, it's the worst it's been since the eighteen-eighties. And the redistribution-of-the-wealth argument? I love it when a Republican says to me, 'The Democrats wanna redistribute the wealth.' Well, there's been a redistribution of wealth—but it's the other fuckin' way!"

It is advice that the Obama campaign is hearing quite a lot, and by last week Obama was warning against a "welfare program for Wall Street," and reproaching finance-industry executives for "greed and irresponsibility."

Rick Boucher, a Democrat who represents southwestern Virginia in the House, has estimated that if Obama gets forty-five per cent of the vote there, he'll win in Virginia. That means Obama would have to improve upon John Kerry's performance by six points. I asked whether a black man could do that well. Saunders insisted that race was not the deciding issue. "That's what burns me up, when they talk about racism down here in the hills," he said. "We vote for blacks. Roanoke City is twenty-seven per cent black and we had a black mayor"—Noel C. Taylor—"for nearly twenty years, a Republican mayor, who was a preacher and a good man. Liberal as hell." Saunders also noted that Virginia was the first state to elect a black governor, L. Douglas Wilder. In 1989, Wilder won with the help of the southwest, which gave him forty-eight per cent of its votes.

If Obama loses Virginia, Saunders says, it will be because he didn't succeed in breaking down cultural barriers. Obama's famous remark, made at a fund-raiser in San Francisco, that rural voters are bitter, which causes them to cling to religion and guns, lingers in the heartland. "I don't pray because of resentment—I pray because it makes my life better," Saunders says. "I don't have a gun because of resentment—I've got a gun because I've always had one. I don't ever remember not having a gun of some kind."

Obama has now visited southwest Virginia twice, and may return again. He has opened eight campaign offices in the area. McCain has one. Obama won't be sponsoring a Nascar racer, but Saunders said that there is something else that Obama could do. "He needs to go sit down with Jim Webb for a while, and talk to him about the power of the culture, and how it works."

A wall in Jim Webb's Washington office is filled with a collection of archival photographs, the centerpiece of which is a striking black-and-white portrait captioned "Appalachian Man." The photograph's anonymous subject is a workingman who could be forty or sixty. His weathered face, vaguely handsome beneath a thick felt hat, is fixed in a glare suggesting skepticism, even disdain. Whoever Appalachian Man was, his image has found the perfect setting.

Webb has been thinking and writing about such people for forty years. When he turned to writing after serving as a Marine infantry officer in Vietnam, he became obsessed with the American cultural divide, and the fact that his people, the Scots-Irish, stood so firmly on one side. The descendants of the Ulster warrior clans that settled the Appalachian frontier were a proud, ornery lot, deeply patriotic and always ready for a fight. They invented country music, fostered the form of democracy named for their kinsman Andrew Jackson, and supplied generals on both sides of the Civil War. In "Born Fighting," his 2004 book about the Scots-Irish influence in American life, Webb summarized the culture's core ethos: Fight. Sing. Drink. Pray.

Webb has cast himself on both sides of the cultural divide. After Vietnam, he began identifying himself as a Republi-

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can, and eventually became Ronald Reagan's Navy Secretary. "There were a lot of people, like myself, who got really disillusioned by the Democratic Party getting away from its message of taking care of working people, and becoming the anti-military party rather than the antiwar party," he told me recently. "There was this huge group, this bellwether group that was sitting there. And after the Democratic Party started obscuring its message they look up and say, At the top, there's no real difference between the parties, no real difference except at least these people"—the Republicans—"are gonna protect God and guns. And they do values-vote."

Webb eventually became disgusted by the Republicans' manipulation of those values voters, through what he calls "Karl Rove tactics."

"The Karl Rove approach is very simple," he says now. "It's just three things: He's not like you, he doesn't understand you, you can't trust him. Our guy is like you, our guy understands you, you can trust him. That's the whole formula." Webb became a Democrat and ran for office, motivated partly by the challenge of attracting disenchanted former Democrats back into the Party, and of moving the Party back toward them.

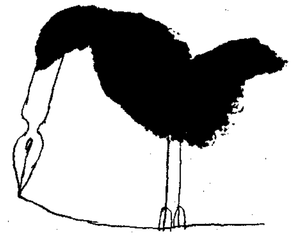
An Obama-Webb ticket would certainly have helped Obama with some of the constituencies most wary of him, but when Webb was asked to undergo vetting for consideration as Obama's running mate he declined. "I know what it's like to be in an Administration," he told me. "You owe the people at the top your absolute loyalty. I did it for four years." Webb might well have chafed in an Obama Administration. He was for offshore drilling—or, at least, he favored allowing Virginia to decide whether its coasts should be explored—when Obama and most of the Party still opposed it. Webb advocates the exploitation of America's vast coal fields, saying, "We're sitting on the Saudi Arabia of coal." Obama used that same term when he spoke in Lebanon, emphasizing the need to develop clean coal technology. But earlier this year he referred to coal as "dirty energy," and his running mate, Joe Biden, said recently in Ohio, "No coal plants here in America. Build 'em, if they're going to build 'em, over there"—in China.

Webb is freer to fashion his own political identity from his position in the Senate. "My prototype really is Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who was able to combine an academic, intellectual career and a government career, really put new ideas out there, and think. I think I've been able to do that. And I don't want to stop doing that. I've got a lot of ideas that don't fit into either party, really."

Recalling Mudcat Saunders's advice for Obama, I asked Webb whether Obama had sought his counsel about breaking down cultural barriers in rural America. "I've done it a few times with him," Webb says. "He's been pretty busy over the last eighteen months, but a good time is when we've had stack votes on the Senate floor and we sit there for an hour, hour and a half, and just sit down and talk about different things." Webb said he urged Obama to read an opinion article Webb wrote for the *Wall Street Journal* in 2004, in which he argued that "the greatest realignment in modern politics would take place rather quickly if the right national leader found a way to bring the Scots-Irish and African-Americans to the same table, and so to redefine a formula that has consciously set them apart for the past two centuries."

"We had some good talks about this," Webb told me. "And I think he really gets it. I think it's one of the reasons he has pushed where he has been pushing."

Webb expects that Obama will perform well in suburban northern Virginia, echoing the view of nearly everyone else that I spoke with in the state. I wondered about that forecast, though, when I attended a rally for McCain and Palin in Fairfax on the morning after the Obama event in Lebanon. The Republican rally had a football-game-day feel, attracting a huge, intensely enthusiastic crowd—estimated at more than twenty thousand people—to a public park. In introducing the Republican ticket, the former Tennessee senator Fred Thompson gave a better performance than he ever did as a primary



candidate, taking on the press for its allegedly incurious approach to Obama even as it investigated Sarah Palin's life with unreined zeal. When Palin took the stage, wearing a black suit and her signature red high heels, the response was rapturous, and many supporters waved signs bearing such messages as "Read My Lipstick—Soccer Moms for Palin." McCain seemed lifted by her presence, and was far more energetic and enthusiastic than the stumbling, unfocussed candidate I'd witnessed on the campaign trail earlier in the summer. He seemed lifted, too, by a sizable turnout of military veterans, whose presence he thankfully acknowledged.

With the Pentagon and all of its military bases, Virginia has a huge military population—the third-highest number of TRICARE-health-insurance recipients in the country. "Veterans are McCain's to lose," Webb said.

The military culture's alienation from the Democratic Party has been another of Webb's literary preoccupations. "If you ask those who served in Vietnam to look back at that war and its legacy," he writes in his latest book, "A Time to Fight,"

> a surprising number will quickly remind you that it was the Democratic Party that put Robert McNamara in the Pentagon and bungled the war's strategy; the Democratic Party that later on became the epicenter of an antiwar movement that wrongly labeled those who were fighting the war as the scapegoats for its failure; the Democratic Party that nominated George McGovern, who promised to go on his knees to Hanoi to end the war if he was elected President; the Democratic Party that pulled the funding plug on South Vietnam with the first vote of the so-called Watergate Congress in early 1975, thus precipitating the fall of Saigon; and Democratic President Jimmy Carter who immediately upon assuming office issued the first blanket pardon of draft evaders in our entire history, elevating every person who broke the law and evaded military service to the status of moral purist.

Webb's larger point in the book, though, is an argument for a return to the Democratic fold. The Republican franchise on military people, he contends, was made forfeit by its rush to war in Iraq and mismanagement of the conflict once there, all driven by "a few Trotskyites," the neocons:

> It is now the Republican Party that populated the Defense Department with a cast of unseemly true believers who propelled America into an unnecessary and strategically unsound war; the Republican Party that persisted in distorting the integrity of the military's officer corps by rewarding sycophancy and punishing honesty; the Republican Party that has most glaringly violated its stewardship of those in uniform; and the Republican Party that continually seeks to politicize military service for its own ends even as it uses their sacrifices as a political shield against criticism for its failed policies.

Webb's disaffection was shared by many in the military culture in 2006, and in Virginia that antipathy toward the Bush Administration almost certainly helped to get Webb elected. "He did have the good fortune of running before the surge," says Frank Atkinson, who was Governor George Allen's policy director and counsellor and is the author of two textbooks on Virginia politics. "And so a lot of his antiwar statements really resonated with the military community, because there are a lot of families of folks deployed who got very unhappy with the President in the 2005-2006 time frame." But the success of the surge strategy in Iraq has muted the war as an election issue.

"The challenge for Barack is to create an identity," Webb said. Like Mudcat Saunders, Webb thinks that Obama would be well served by emphasizing a populist theme for the rest of the campaign. "There's not a lot of difference between the situations of those people he was trying to help in Chicago and the people in southwest Virginia," Webb said.

Our visit happened to take place just as the financial markets were plummeting. Webb sensed an opportunity for Obama to break through the old values-driven alignments, in Virginia and beyond.

"What's happened over the past five days could dramatically change everything," Webb said. "This is the time for Barack Obama to step forward and really show that he has the intellect and the vision to help get us out of this. Because now it's affecting everyone. We're in a real crisis here. And I think it's probably going to break Barack's way." ♦

STATISTICAL DEPARTMENT

From an article in the Pueblo (Colo.) Chieftain about a retired schoolteacher seeking a seat on the State Board of Education.

"The top half of the students are well-educated, the bottom half receive extra help but the middle half we are leaving out," she said.

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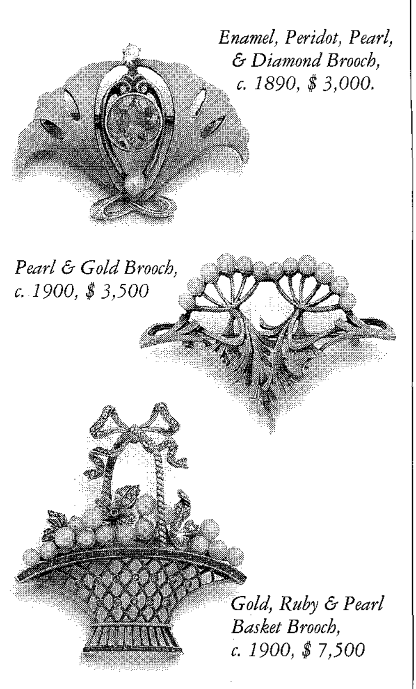

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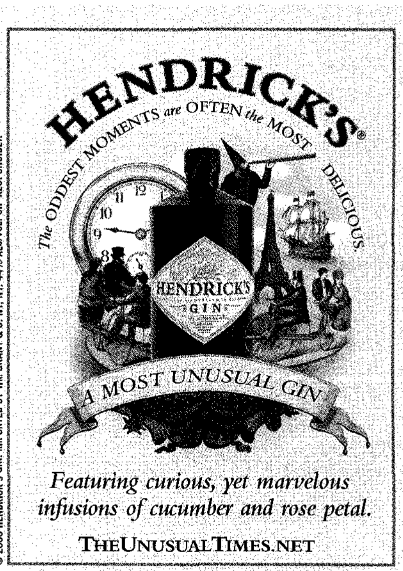
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THE ARTIST OF THE PORTRAIT

The deliverance of Elizabeth Peyton.

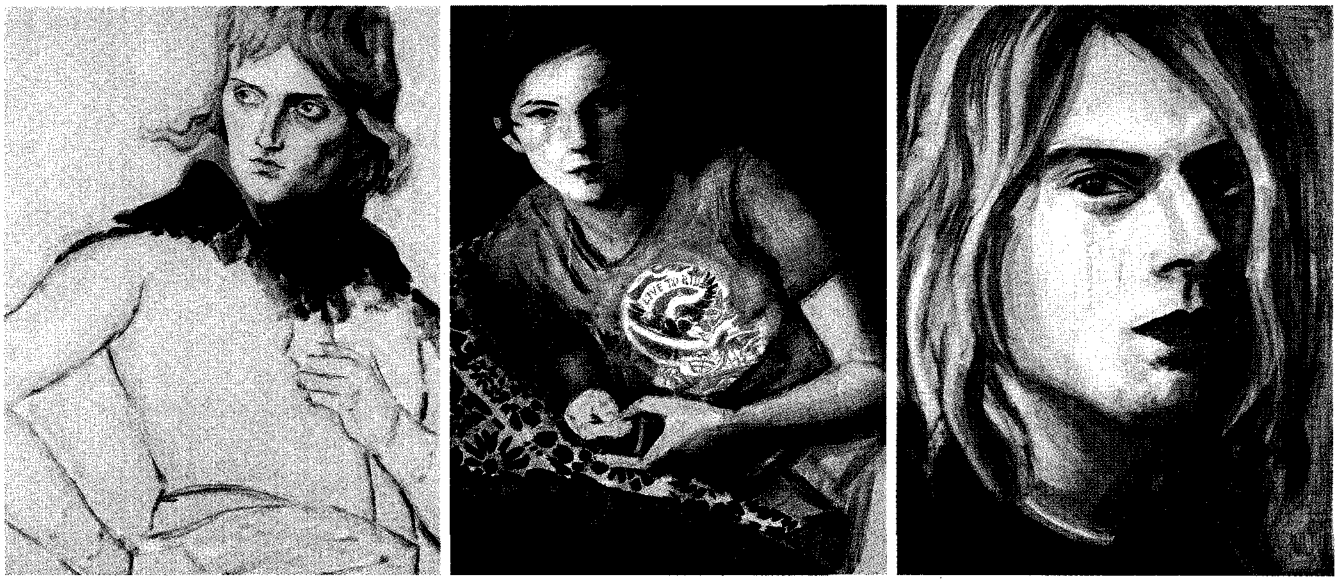
BY CALVIN TOMKINS

My hindsight is as good as yours, but I'm still trying to figure out how Elizabeth Peyton launched her career with an exhibition of idealized figurative portrait drawings of Napoleon Bonaparte; Ludwig II, King of Bavaria; the King of Thailand; Mademoiselle George, Napoleon's mistress; and other worthies of earlier times. No artist in recent memory has sailed into the mainstream with work that seemed so far out of it. My guess is that only about fifty people saw the show, which was presented, in 1993, in a room at the Chelsea Hotel, on West Twenty-third Street—visitors had to ask for the key to Room 828—but notice was taken, pictures were sold, and Peyton, at the age of twenty-seven, was on her way. Since then, her vividly painted, lushly romantic images of rock stars, film idols, and, eventually, fellow-artists and friends have brought her the kind of fervid admiration that non-admirers find inexplicable and annoying. "She's doing something very simple in a very complicated age, and it can easily be misunderstood and trivialized," Gavin Brown, Peyton's dealer, who is also a sort of co-conspirator and goad to the widely diverse band of artists he represents, says. Peyton calls what she's doing "pictures of people," rather than portraits. Whatever they are, the way she does them, with an unembarrassed emphasis on visual pleasure, suggests a shift in current attitudes about art and artmaking.

Now forty-two, and about to have her first important survey exhibition—it opens on October 8th at the New Museum of Contemporary Art—Peyton approaches this milestone with her usual combination of discipline and insouciance. Mid-career retrospectives can invite critical backlashes, but Peyton appears unworried. "I feel like I have a lot to give, so I might be disappointed if it's not noticed," she told me recently. "But I've made these pictures, and I feel great about them." This kind of quiet confidence is characteristic of Peyton. She is on good terms with her work, herself, and her life, and apparently has been since the summer of 1990, when she discovered her direction as an artist.

"That was a really bad summer," she reflected, with a self-mocking grimace. We were sitting in the third-floor studio of her small nineteenth-century house in the West Village, which she bought two years ago. Peyton is slim, poised, and direct. Her clothes are understated but carefully chosen—Marc Jacobs, whom she has painted, is her favorite designer. Her dark hair is cut very short, gamine style. She smiles often, and looks you right in the eye when she speaks. "I'd graduated from the School of Visual Arts a few years earlier," she continued, "and I was living with my ex-boyfriend in a tiny apartment on the Lower East Side. Earlier that summer, I'd lost my job, as an assistant to Ronald Jones, a teacher at S.V.A. I didn't have any money, and I was so ashamed of myself for not having a job. All I did was read. I read a book on Napoleon, by Vincent Cronin, and a book by Stefan Zweig on Marie Antoinette. I read Stendahl's 'The Charterhouse of Parma' and 'The Red and the Black.' Even though I was miserable, I was eating up every word in those books. And somehow I came out of this knowing what I wanted to do."

Her deliverance began with a charcoal drawing of Napoleon as a fine-featured young first lieutenant, his longish hair parted in the middle. (The image was suggested by the Antoine-Jean Gros portrait on her copy of Cronin's biography.) Three years earlier, when she was still in art school, she had made some drawings of Ludwig II of Bavaria, known as the Mad King, an eccentric aesthete and a patron of Richard Wagner's; he was deposed in 1886 and died two days later, under mysterious circumstances. She did several more Ludwig pictures in 1991, including a fairly large full-length painting on glass. She also made a drawing of Princess Elizabeth at the age of sixteen (after a photograph by Cecil Beaton), and several more drawings of Napoleon. "For the first time, I realized that there was something very important about portraiture," she said. "Reading about Napoleon made me think how people make history. They are the way the world moves, and they contain their time. It shows in their faces. I'd always made pictures of people, even when I was a little, little person. The urge was there—I just didn't know why. When I did that first drawing of Napoleon, I realized this is something I have to do and want to do."



"Napoleon (After Louis David, Le General Bonaparte vers 1797)" (2005); "Live to Ride (E.P.)" (2003); "Kurt" (1994).

COURTESY ELIZABETH PEYTON/GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE, N.Y.

A few people had sensed, before this, that Peyton's quiet manner veiled a fiercely determined ambition. "Her practice was fully formed by the time I met her in art school," T. J. (for Thomas John) Wilcox, her classmate at S.V.A., told me. As a student, she made deft copies of Old Masters and portraits based on the description of certain characters in nineteenth-century novels, which she painted on glass panels enclosed in old window frames. Her pictures caught and held the eye. Photography may have appropriated the human need for images of other humans, but every so often a painter finds new ways to animate the handmade likeness. In Peyton's case, the impetus was pure attitude. Her art, as Ronald Jones, her former employer, wrote some years later, was "a revival of idealism, and a revolt from reason."

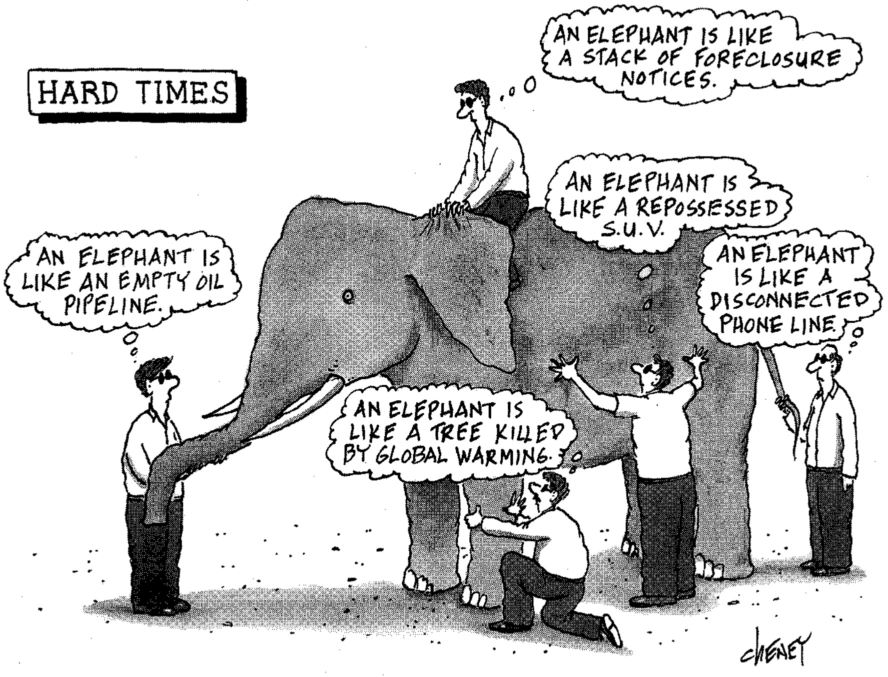
A young collector bought a painting from Peyton's thesis show in 1987, at the end of her last year at S.V.A.—common practice now but unheard of then—and told the dealer Althea Viafora to go and see her work. A year later, a selection of Peyton's paintings on glass appeared in a solo show at the Althea Viafora Gallery, and drew a favorable notice in *Art in America*. ("Peyton uses paint the way some artists use composition: it holds each portrait together in all its formal energies and psychic vicissitudes.") She didn't show again for five years, but, from the summer of 1990 on, her course was set. At a moment when the neo-expressionist juggernaut (Julian Schnabel, David Salle, et al.) was losing momentum, and art students were regularly being told that painting was dead, Peyton kept right on making pictures of figures she admired in European history and literature.

To support herself, she got a job as a photo researcher. She dyed her dark hair platinum blond. She lived alone in a small apartment on East Second Street, went to galleries and downtown art events, and spent a lot of weekend time at the Metropolitan Museum. She and T. J. Wilcox used to haunt the Van Dyck room, as she calls it—paintings by Rubens are the main draw there, but Peyton prefers Van Dyck. "Rubens is so general," she said this summer, when I visited the Met with her. "With him, it's just some person in some place. With Van Dyck it's always a particular person in a particular place."

In 1991, she met Rirkrit Tiravanija. Rirkrit (as everyone calls him), who grew up in Thailand and went to college in Canada, was already an underground art star; he was taking conceptual art in a radical new direction, based on social interactions. (At one early show, Rirkrit turned the premises into a makeshift kitchen, where he cooked and served Thai food to surprised gallerygoers.) Peyton, who had noticed him at gallery openings, thought of him as "that cute Thai guy." A few weeks after they met, she ran into him at an art opening, and Rirkrit confided that he was having visa problems—the only way he could stay in the country was to get married. Peyton said, "I'll marry you." She meant it. "She said it in a very enthusiastic, loving way," Rirkrit remembers. She moved in with him soon afterward, and they were married three weeks later, at City Hall. T. J. Wilcox, who was and still is a close friend, told me that her falling so immediately and irrevocably in love with Rirkrit "showed an uncanny knowledge of what's right for her at any given moment."

Rirkrit introduced her to Gavin Brown, a brusque and somewhat intimidating young Brit who was then manning the front desk at Gallery 303, which had a reputation for finding new talent. Brown was an artist himself, but he was getting increasingly involved with the careers of other artists. When Peyton brought some of her drawings to Gallery 303, his reaction was instantaneous: "We gotta do something with these." That's how the Chelsea Hotel show came about.

The recession that hit the art market in


HARD TIMES
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CHENEY

1990 was still in force at the time. Some galleries had gone under, and young artists were doing their own shows in out-of-the-way places. The Chelsea Hotel show was a conceptual-art event concocted by Brown, who had left Gallery 303 but did not yet have his own gallery. Brown's idea was that the show would become part of the rich history of the hotel, where so many artists had lived, and where Warhol had filmed "The Chelsea Girls." It marked, at any rate, a moment of self-definition for Peyton and Brown, the beginning of their real careers. Sadie Coles, who was working for the Anthony d'Offay Gallery in London, visited the Chelsea Hotel show and bought a Napoleon drawing; in 1997, she opened her own gallery in London and began representing Peyton there. Andy Stillpass, a Cincinnati collector, didn't get to the Chelsea Hotel show, but he bought three drawings from the four-page brochure that Brown had printed, and went on to buy many more. "The eighties had made me suspicious of any art that seduced you," he said recently, "but I had to totally rethink that with Elizabeth."

Rirkrit's career had taken off by 1993. One of the new peripatetic artists who showed mainly at big international exhibitions and art festivals, he travelled a great deal, and Peyton's job as a photo researcher usually kept her from going with him. This was hard on the marriage, but it was also an incentive to concentrate on her own work. She drew constantly, and was starting to do more paintings. In the early fall of 1994, deciding that it was now or never, she quit her job and began a series of paintings of the rock star Kurt Cobain, who had killed himself a few months earlier. Peyton had listened to rock music as a teenager, but less so as an adult; at college, she steeped herself in Chopin and Verdi. Returning to New York after a trip to Germany with Rirkrit, though, she heard, at a friend's house, the "Unplugged" album by Nirvana, Cobain's band. Listening to Cobain's cracked, anguished voice drilling through walls of dissonant sound, she found herself thinking, My God, this man has been alive while I'm alive, making this incredible music. He was the same age as me or maybe younger, and what he was doing was very personal, but it just radiated out—so many people needed to hear it.

Most of the paintings and drawings she made of Cobain are based on photographs in a *Rolling Stone* book, which came out that Christmas. Relatively small (the largest painting is twenty by twenty-four inches; most are considerably smaller), they show him in two-dimensional closeup—long hair, blue eyes, red lips, and pale skin. Peyton applied her colors in broad, vigorous brushstrokes and allowed them to drip in places, Abstract Expressionist style. The effect was vivid and immediate, and almost embarrassingly personal.

With the Cobain paintings, Peyton took the step into her own time. She had done pictures of contemporaries before—friends in art school, the tennis star John McEnroe—but Cobain was her first serious attempt to portray an American subject, and she invested his image with all the vulnerability and passion of her own self-discovery. Gavin Brown was sure that she had made a breakthrough. Brown had opened his own space, a minuscule showroom on Broome Street. The Cobain paintings and other new works by Peyton, including two portraits of the French actor Jean-Pierre Léaud, went on view in a solo show there in March, 1995. To just about everyone's amazement, Roberta Smith reviewed the show prominently in the *Times*. She described the paintings as "beautiful in a slightly awkward, self-effacing way," and went on to refer to the Cobain pictures as "tributes of an extremely sophisticated fan in mourning."

Peyton's early work had mostly positive reviews, but it struck (and still strikes) some people as sentimental kitsch. She was accused of "pop-idol infatuation" of the sort "commonly associated with fawning teenagers" (Joshua Decter, in *Artforum*), and of depicting "the world according to MTV—slick, 'beautiful' and nothing but surface" (Sue Hubbard, in the London *Time Out*). Peyton was often linked, in reviews, with Karen Kilimnik, who paints historical tableaux, although the two had little in common; Kilimnik's pictures told stories, Peyton's evoked lives. Several curators at the Museum of Modern Art were appalled when Laura Hoptman, then a young assistant curator, put Peyton and two other figurative artists, Luc Tuymans and John Currin, in one of MOMA's "Projects" (new talent) exhibitions in 1997. "To the MOMA culture, these people were completely unknown then," Hoptman said. (Hoptman, who is now a senior curator at the New Museum, has organized Peyton's current show there.) People either loved or hated her work—a clear sign that she was breaking new (or new old) ground.

Her detractors complained that even though most of her subjects were men—

the British rockers Johnny Rotten and Sid Vicious (of the Sex Pistols), Liam and Noel Gallagher (Oasis), Jarvis Cocker (Pulp), and film stars like Leonardo DiCaprio—they all looked feminized and somewhat alike: pale, thin, and romantically decadent. Even admiring critics sometimes wrote about her having "crushes" on her subjects, and this seemed to bother her more than the negative reviews. "I don't like that word 'crush,'" she told me. "It sounds light—you know, l-i-t-e. I really love the people I paint. I believe in them, I'm happy they're in the world." Althea Viafora had arranged some portrait commissions when Peyton was just out of S.V.A., and she tried going to strangers' apartments for sittings. Although the sitters seemed happy enough with the results, Peyton was not. "I just wasn't very good at it," she said. She had to be at least a little in love with her subjects. Falling in love was something she did easily but not lightly—her marriage to Rirkrit was evidence of that—and the emotion that she felt for Napoleon or Kurt Cobain was evident in the pictures she made. This may be what prompted people to think that they looked alike. Peyton wanted to catch in each face "that particular moment when they're about to become what they'll become," as she phrased it, but what she also caught, again and again, was a mirror image of her own affection.

The androgyny in her early work was in tune with the culture it came out of—all those rail-thin boy rockers wearing eyeshadow and skin-tight clothes had their counterparts in the art world's transgender performance artists. Peyton reflected a shift in sexual attitudes, in the same way that Andy Warhol reflected the louche sexual undercurrents of the nineteen-sixties. In her case, though, there was a complete absence of irony and cynicism, the twin pillars of postmodern style, and a startling intensity of visual delight. As she told a British interviewer in 1996, "There's something about a particular kind of male sexuality that has always appealed to me: straight boys who aren't afraid of being feminine, who aren't afraid to be very open about the whole thing." Her work caught on fairly quickly in London and also in Berlin, where the young and supportive gallery owner Burkhard Riemschneider has represented her since 1995. Chrissie Iles, a British curator who had joined the Whitney Museum staff in 1997, put Peyton in the 2004 Whitney Biennial, in the same room with David Hockney. "Elizabeth's painting has a kind of sweetness that is Hockney-like," Iles told me. (Although Peyton has done several paintings of Hockney, she's never met him.) "Her understanding of color and light is extraordinary, and her brushwork is gorgeous, sumptuous and delicate at the same time, but the technique is very different from Hockney's. Her paintings are often very jewel-like. Elizabeth's work is outside the language of modernism."

In late July, my wife, Dodie Kazanjian, and I went to Two Palms Press, on lower Broadway, to sit for a portrait etching by Elizabeth Peyton. She positioned herself at one end of a long table, and us about four feet away, close together in two chairs. Resting a small copper plate on her knee, she smiled encouragingly, and said that all we had to do was sit still, or try to. "Like apples," I said, remembering what Cézanne reportedly told someone he was painting: "Be like an apple." I am reasonably sure that Peyton is not in love with us, but this was her idea (when she asks someone to sit for the first time, she calls it "popping the question"), and we had all agreed that it might be a useful exercise. After a minute or so, she deepened her focus and stopped smiling. Her eyes, behind large oval glasses, darted back and forth from our faces to the copper plate, a quick look up and then a longer one down while she made rapid strokes with the wood-handled etching tool in her left hand. Now and then, she leaned forward, zooming in on some facial detail; I found I could meet her eye when she did this, but I was more relaxed when she did it to Dodie. Gradually, my self-consciousness receded, along with panicky attempts to remember whether it's teeth-together-lips-apart or the reverse. Mournful music played softly on the stereo—later, she told us it was the soundtrack for "I'm Not There," the Bob Dylan film.

My mind wandered. Peyton draws with her left hand and holds the etching plate with her right, which is deformed—a birth defect. As her mother, who is also named Elizabeth, explained it, she had "a lot of X-rays for breast cancer just before Betsy was born," and the doctors thought that that was a possible cause. Growing up in Brookfield, Connecticut, the youngest of five children (three from her father's

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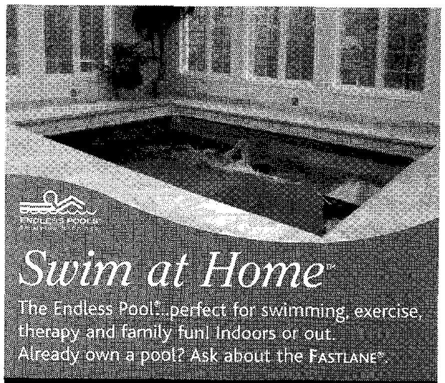
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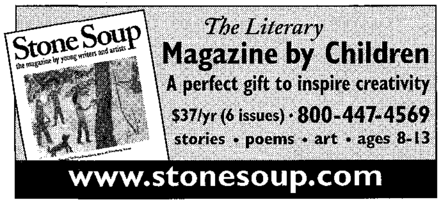
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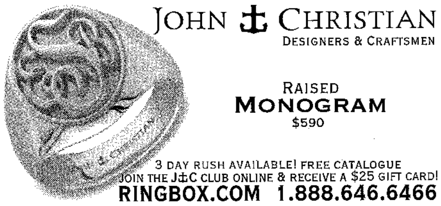
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previous marriage), Elizabeth also had a vision problem. “Her eyes didn’t fuse,” her mother said. “One eye would sort of wander. She had eye surgery when she was three, and that made them cosmetically straight, but fusion did not occur as they’d hoped.” The brain uses other visual cues to adapt to the problem, but Peyton still sees the world in two dimensions, like a photograph. In a 2004 article in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, two neuroscientists suggested that Rembrandt had the same condition.

Neither of these handicaps kept Elizabeth from being an active, independent child. Her parents, who had a shop in Brookfield where they designed and sold candles, encouraged her to feel that she was someone special. “I didn’t really get that when I was little,” she recalls. “I wanted to be like everybody else. Some kids would tease me about my hand, of course, and that wasn’t great. But then, as a young teen-ager, I came to feel it was O.K. I didn’t have to worry about being like everybody else, because I was never going to be.” From being a shy and insecure child, she emerged as an adventurous and popular teen-ager, a good student who dated a varsity football player and was elected president of her high-school class in her senior year. She also became an avid reader. Although her father had distanced himself from his own formal, haute-bourgeois family (he graduated from law school but never practiced law), two or three times a year the Peytons would visit his parents, who lived in a big house in Bronxville. His mother was an ardent Francophile, and Peyton remembers sitting for hours on a sofa in the house, leafing through current issues of *Paris Match*. It was an experience that helped to fuel her later passion for the novels of Balzac, Stendhal, Flaubert, and, especially, Proust’s “In Search of Lost Time.” Peyton’s mother, who had gone to art school, encouraged her youngest daughter’s art interest from the beginning. “Betsy started drawing faces when she was three or four,” she remembers. “She’d do them upside down, but when I asked to see one she held it right side up.”

After a little more than half an hour of work, Peyton sat back and said, “O.K., done.” She showed us the copper plate—we could see only its tracery of fine lines in the dark asphalt coating, fragments of which clung to the surface. The double portrait looked very assured; I could see myself, Dodie less clearly. But with Peyton likeness is never the main issue.

Two Palms is where, in 2003, she began to use live sitters more frequently, instead of working mostly from photographs. Two years earlier, she had given up her New York apartment and her studio and moved to the North Fork of Long Island. If she came to town, she would often work on prints at Two Palms. In 2003, she started a series of large monotypes (one-off prints) of people she knew. “I wanted to work from life and I wanted to see my friends,” she said, “so I had them come to the print studio. Monotypes seemed like a painting process, and I really liked the challenge of doing that.” She still uses photographs. “Sometimes in a photograph you can understand better the organic structure and how the elements of the face relate to each other,” she explains. “But there is something with a live sitter that becomes a very clear record of two people in the same room at the same time.”

Peyton asked us if we’d mind sitting for a second etching. This one took a little longer, forty-five minutes. When it was finished, she thanked us and said, “You were great apples.” She thought the second plate was better than the first, but there was no telling whether the image, when it was printed, would meet her standards. Quite a few of her things, paintings as well as prints, end up in what she calls her private “graveyard.” “I make a ton of bad work,” she once said.

There has been a noticeable change in Peyton’s work since she started painting more from life. Most of her live subjects have been artists in mid-career, like her, or close friends, and they look their age, more mature, more idiosyncratic, and far less androgynous than the pop celebrities. She sometimes does the same person obsessively, time and again, awake and asleep, using her entire repertoire of painting, drawing, watercolor, and printmaking. Her color is richer and subtler than it used to be. Until recently, she never used pure white or black pigment in a painting, preferring to let the gesso undercoat come through as white, and blending two or more colors to approximate black; now she’s using some paints that are premixed with white. Her paintings are as visually seductive (i.e., beautiful) as ever, but she gets deeper into the lives of her subjects.

Her own life has moved on. The marriage to Rirkrit gradually unravelled. They remain friends, share the same gallery (Rirkrit joined Gavin Brown in 1995), and go to each other's openings whenever possible, but they separated in the late nineteen-nineties and were divorced in 2004. Rirkrit remarried, and now spends half the year in Thailand. Elizabeth moved out to the North Fork with Tony Just, a young artist whose looks had fascinated her when they met, two years earlier—she thought he was a dead ringer for the youthful Napoleon. They travelled to France together soon after they met, so she could take him to Fontainebleau, the last place that Napoleon and Josephine had lived before his defeat and exile; she took dozens of photographs of him there, several of which became paintings. They had Napoleonic eagles tattooed on the inside of their wrists, hers on the left wrist and his on the right, so the images would come together when they held hands. Elizabeth already had a small tattoo of Ludwig II's crown, higher up, on the same arm.

They had moved to Long Island at the end of August, 2001. "September 11th happened the day we had cable turned on," Peyton said, "and everything got more focussed. I felt like I only wanted to paint what was most important to me, which were the people in my life." In the modest one-story house she had bought there, her painting flourished and so did his. (Just, who also shows with Gavin Brown, paints in a semi-abstract, Pop-influenced style.) "I remember people saying there was a lot more green in my palette after I moved to the country," Peyton said, giggling. Tony Just remembers that one of their neighbors, a furniture dealer, kept an irritatingly close watch on the rising auction prices for Peyton's work. (Her paintings now sell for up to three hundred thousand dollars on the primary market, and have come close to a million in private resale.) She worked most of the time, with breaks for running and swimming. Peyton had started to swim long distances when she was fourteen, on her own; she didn't have any interest in competitions or swim teams, but being in the water for an hour or more still makes her feel great.

Her range of subjects expanded. She did a riveting self-portrait in 2003 that showed her half reclining on a patterned quilt, wearing a red T-shirt, one side of her face in shadow, her eyes burning into the viewer's. (The Whitney, which owns the painting, used it in advertising the Biennial of 2004.) She painted some small, glowing still-lifes, and she painted her first and, so far, her only landscape, of a big, leafless tree silhouetted against a wintry sky, which she'd been looking at on her daily runs. "After that, I said I was going to be outdoors and make pictures like this all the time," she told me, "but my relationship was just with that tree." She made several paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe, from photographs by Stieglitz. A few months earlier, Peyton had visited the O'Keeffe museum, in Santa Fe, where she'd overheard a docent ask if anyone in her group could name five other great American women artists. "After a longish silence," she said, "one person ventured, 'Frida Kahlo?' "

Elizabeth and Tony broke up in 2007, after seven years together. Elizabeth began spending more time in New York, in the Greenwich Village house, which she had bought the year before. Her new companion, Pati Hertling, is a young German woman, a lawyer whose field is the restitution of looted art objects. Hertling appeared in four of the works in Peyton's most recent New York show, earlier this year, at Gavin Brown's enterprise, as he calls the gallery; it is now in a much larger space on Greenwich Street.

Quite a few people, myself included, thought Peyton's last show there was her strongest to date. The surprise in it was a cityscape, of a corner in the Village where three streets intersect; although only nine by six inches, it is a crowded, complex scene, with moving figures and interlocking buildings. "I walk by that intersection every day, going to the gym, and I got stuck on it," she told me. "There's something very sculptural about those buildings. I thought, Why don't more people make paintings of New York City?" Peyton's most informed support has often come from other artists. As John Currin said recently, "What's impressive in the last show is that her subject matter hasn't changed that much but the internal structure has. It's become more complex."

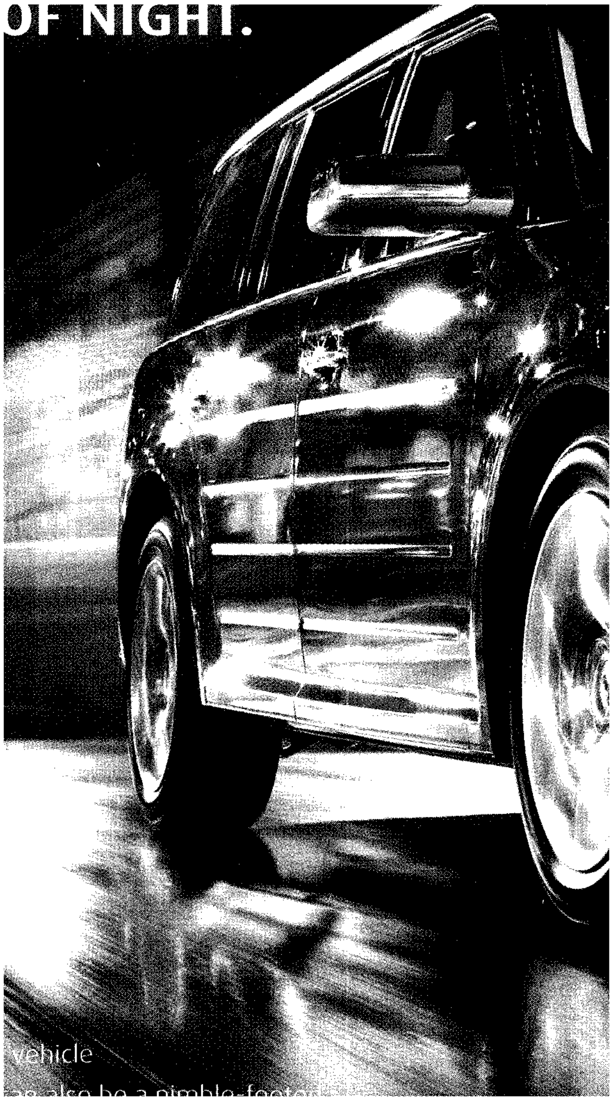
The show's other highlights, for me, were three paintings of the artist Matthew Barney. Painted from life, they show—in Barney's sombre concentration, deep-set blue eyes, and powerful hands—how far Peyton has travelled from the Kurt Cobain paintings. These are true portraits. They provide access to the subject's inner life and thought, in ways that photographs can rarely approach. "The invention of photography has dealt a mortal blow to the old modes of expression, in painting as well as in poetry," André Breton wrote. The blow was heavy but not mortal. Photography never supplanted the art of figurative painting, or of portraiture, either, but, in order to paint a modern portrait, artists have had to reinvent the genre's ancient traditions, as Picasso did.

"Once you work from photographs, it changes your vision," the contemporary portrait painter Chuck Close says. "You never go back to looking at life the same way." Close works entirely from photographs. Lucian Freud, another contemporary artist known largely for his portraits, paints them from life. Both adhere, though, to Picasso's working premise that a portrait is a subjective document: a viewer recognizes the artist first, the sitter second (if at all). The same is true of Peyton, whose "pictures of people" have always been highly subjective. Peyton's work carries her own signature, with its bold, large-scale brushstrokes on small surfaces. It also contains her vision of something I am tempted to describe as the bite of time. We talked about this the other day, sitting in the studio at her New York house. What was it, I asked, that she got from reading "In Search of Lost Time"?

"It was in the last volume," she said, after some reflection. "The narrator goes to a party, and sees these people who have been in his life, and they've aged and so has he. But because of his memories he realizes that all times are present in the same time. This made so much sense to me."

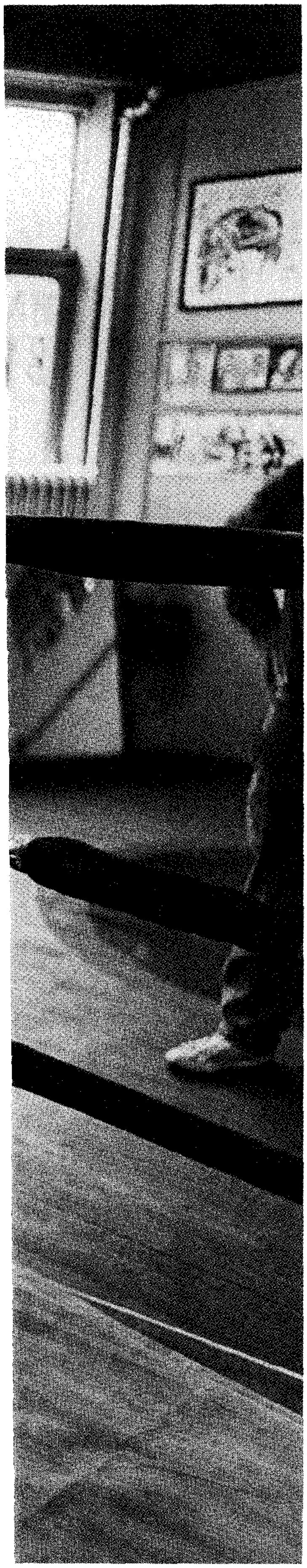
Was time past and time present something she was trying to deal with more directly in her recent work? I asked. "I don't think about it visually," she answered. "Sometimes I feel I'm not making it clear enough, what I'm really interested in." She paused and considered. "I just think that if you look it's there," she said. "It's all right there, everything you need to know should be present in what you're looking at. Art work expresses what it's like to be human, and one of the things about being human is time passing." ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
More art by Elizabeth Peyton.


OF NIGHT.
vehicle
an also be a nimble-footed

Ford
Drive one

From his service in the Second World War until not long before his death, last year, Mailer in his correspondence tirelessly addressed



litical themes of his time.

LIFE AND LETTERS

IN THE RING

Grappling with the twentieth century.

BY NORMAN MAILER

To Beatrice Mailer

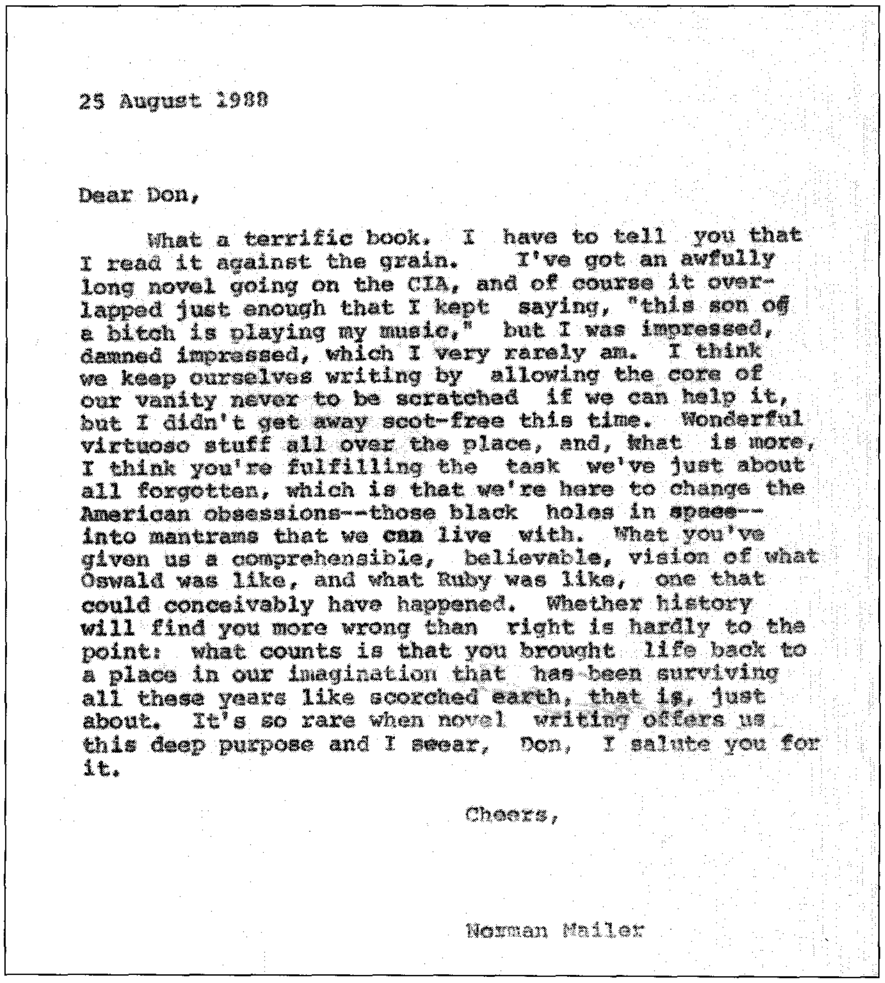
August 8, 1945

Sweet Baby,

The news of the atom bomb has created more talk out here than the news of V-E day, and as much as President Roosevelt's death. I feel very confused about it. (This is written after just the barest communiqué. I don't know what it's done.) I'm understanding now how the bonds of self-interest affect thought. A good part of me approves anything which will shorten the war, and get me home sooner, and this is often antagonistic to older more basic principles. For instance I hope the peace time draft is passed because if it's not, there may be an agonizingly slow demobilization. In the same sense I approve of an instrument that will kill under optimum conditions many people in one instant.

But really what a terrifying perspective this is. We've always talked of humanity destroying itself, but now it seems so near a thing, so much a matter of decades, of a very easily counted number of bombs. This atom smashing business is going to herald the final victory of the machine. It had always been no more than pleasurable calculation in the physics I studied, a remotely attainable dream, and even then a terrible one, for the atomic energy in a mass the size of a pea is enough to drive a locomotive so many fantastic times about the earth.

I think our age is going to mark the



25 August 1988

Dear Don,

What a terrific book. I have to tell you that I read it against the grain. I've got an awfully long novel going on the CIA, and of course it overlapped just enough that I kept saying, "this son of a bitch is playing my music," but I was impressed, damned impressed, which I very rarely am. I think we keep ourselves writing by allowing the core of our vanity never to be scratched if we can help it, but I didn't get away scot-free this time. Wonderful virtuoso stuff all over the place, and, what is more, I think you're fulfilling the task we've just about all forgotten, which is that we're here to change the American obsessions--those black holes in space--into mantrams that we can live with. What you've given us a comprehensible, believable, vision of what Oswald was like, and what Ruby was like, one that could conceivably have happened. Whether history will find you more wrong than right is hardly to the point: what counts is that you brought life back to a place in our imagination that has been surviving all these years like scorched earth, that is, just about. It's so rare when novel writing offers us this deep purpose and I swear, Don, I salute you for it.

Cheers,

Norman Mailer

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: THE NORMAN MAILER ESTATE ARCHIVES

end of such concepts as man's will and mass determination of power. The world will be controlled by a few men, politicians and technicians—Spengler's men of the late West-European-American civilization. Much as he stimulates me, I'm no Spenglerian. In the alternatives of doing the necessary or nothing, I prefer nothing if the necessary is unpalatable.

Really, darling, the vista is horrifying. There will be another war, if not in twenty years, then in fifty, and if half of mankind survives, then what of the next war—I believe that to survive the world cities of tomorrow will be built a mile beneath the earth. Man then will have escaped his animal heritage—the insects will no longer bother him, and Scarr-like in searching for heaven, he will have descended a thousand fathoms nearer to Hell. . . .

So little of love in this, but I am a little soul-sick tonight. The more I think about these things, the more frightening they become. What combination can beat the alloy of mechanism with sentimentality.

I need you in my arms tonight.

I love thee,
Norman

To Fanny and I. B. Mailer, Anne and David Kessler

September 4, 1945

Dear Mother & Dad, Aunt Nan & Uncle Dave,

. . . I saw an historic event or so the announcer informed me. We passed about a mile from the Missouri just as the surrender was being signed, and I got a kick out of hearing it announced over the radio as I saw it through a porthole. The commentator said, "Symbolically, the sun has come out and is shining over Tokyo Bay as the surrender is signed and peace is with us." Maybe I couldn't see as well as he, but the sky seemed as cloudy as ever. . . .

All my love, dears,
Norman

P.S. I weigh 145 lbs. now which is as much as I've ever weighed. So don't worry about my health.

To Beatrice Mailer

February 13, 1946

Hello Schnoog,

I've been doing a little thinking trying to reestablish some first principles of belief for myself, political belief that is. Or really, what I was doing was figuring a political credo to follow if I could believe in the improvement of man.

First of all, it seems quite self-evident that the only really decent government would be a Marxist one, but, and it is very difficult to figure out how this can be so, the emphasis must be away from government on the individual instead of the state. If I were to go political, I could see only one procedure, and that is to form a new Communist Party having nothing to do with Russia. I hate Russia (the govt. not the people), I do not admire her as you do. Admitting that her offensiveness and organization were dictated by the pressure of the world, the fact still remains that she stands now as a strangler to freedom of the individual, and I fear she is on a totalitarian trek from which there is no retreat. This New C.P. of mine would underplay the economic, the political; you cannot found a way of life on a part of man's whole soul, and emphasize the individual growth which is necessary. Remember my Militant Christians of Communism—it's something on that idea. You cannot found an ethic on economics, it is far more reasonable to orient it about sex say. The Communal Govt I see would be secondary, a natural outgrowth of a time recognition of things like equality and humility and dignity and creativeness expressed. The Quakers, I think, are a good example of this—I understand they have government which is good, but it comes last, as a natural equitable political shaping of their credo. . . .

All of what I have written is bullshit, naïve bullshit. I do not believe it, for I cannot believe in anything, but if I could, that is what I would stand for. What do you say, kiddo? . . .

I love thee so much, schnoog,
Norman

To Mark Linenthal and Alice Adams

April 30, 1949

Dear Mark and Alice,

. . . Actually, I'm not in the sense of not belonging to anything at this time, for all my ideas are too much in flux, but privately, emotionally, things are painful, for I have many Communist friends who are good people, albeit intellectual snobs, and they are hurt and worried about me. But finally I have come to realize that a political position must be separated from one's attitude toward people. (For example one should not join X Party because one likes the people in it.) This species of liberal shit and blood is something I expect you're still both prone to, and it's impossible for you to end with no political conclusion and no political program since every nice guy you meet in the camp-of-the-enemy undermines you. Viz: Norman Thomas. You know so many nice people who are Thomists so you think he must have something, when of course he is dreck. But then that is the depressing thing. You read *politics* and *Partisan Review* today, and there are no longer ideas in them, just canapés, and despite the brilliance of all their people and their erudition, etc. etc. they no longer think, they merely hate. Stunned, disillusioned, broken, they gravitate to a political vacuum like Thomas because it costs them nothing. Objectively they support the American war program, aid it, abet it, are at certain times the vanguard in an approach to war, and indeed when war comes I think an astonishing number of them are going to be bureaucratic intellectual wheels of the war mechanism. In the meantime, however, to keep their purity, they vote for Thomas. . . .

In re: this, I'm going to continue this obnoxious superior tone for another paragraph. I must confess Alice that I don't think much of what you're reading. The truth is you're looking at peripheral works, and despite occasional brilliances, their general effect is worthless. We don't learn chemistry by reading a book here and there about the philosophical extensions of some new discovery when we know nothing about chemistry itself. Marxism is a tool, it's a way of looking at things, and not a series of value-judgments, and if you want to learn it (a dreary process) you've got to read the source books, and study them. At least, study "Capital." If you find it uncongenial, you will at least have had the pleasure of studying a genius, and the incalculable agony. It is *hard.* But every day after mole-like I've studied my twenty pages, I feel as if I've come out of a shower bath.

If you find that studying economics has no appeal to you, then forget about politics, I don't mean this snidely. There are any number of other areas of activity which are far more delightful and fruitful for people. I just intend that to dabble in politics, to risk judgments on the halfway level is a completely confusing and unproductive process, and time so spent is best distributed on other things. . . .

Love from Bea, love from me,
Norman

To Philip Allan Friedman

April 24, 1953

Dear Mr. Friedman,

I'm afraid I won't be able to be of much help to you. I met [Sinclair] Lewis only once in the fall of 1948 at his house in Williamstown, Mass, and although I remember him very warmly, and he was in fine form that day, I doubt whether I could tell you anything which would be new.

One thing of course was his extraordinary vitality, and his child-like sense of discovering everything for himself, so that no matter what he said—be it banal or original—he delivered with great enthusiasm, and a kind of delight in the workings of his mind. For an example: at the time I was sympathetic to Stalinism, and he started scolding me with great good humor, his manner something of a cross between a kid brother and a doting uncle. "I can understand it of course," he said, "it's like religion. Uncle Joe Stalin is the pope for all you people. Why that's what he is, a pope, and all those Hollywood writers, very nice people some of them by the way, who are all giving their money, giving their donations to the party, it's like buying a mass to be said by Pope Uncle Joe," and he laughed with enormous pleasure in the idea, as if never before had any parallel been drawn between the Church and the Communist Party. . . .

I hope this will be of some small use to you.

Yours,
Norman Mailer

To Charley and Jill Devlin

April 30, 1954

Dear Charley and Jill,

. . . Did you ever read "Lie Down in Darkness," by William Styron? It's not a great novel, but it is one hell of a novel, and I think of all of us, he has the biggest talent, the only one say who could some day write a novel as great as Proust's for example. Anyway, he's in New York now, and is one hell of a great guy, and I've been a little bit on the writers' circuit because [James] Jones has been in town too. Jones is something too. His great charm is a tremendous kind of animal magnetism which gives you the feeling that while you're around him things are just going to happen, and indeed they often do. He's a most peculiar mixture of Warden and Prewitt, very complex, very noisy, very crude, very affectionate, amazing you first with his naïveté and then with his shrewdness and insight. With it all, he putters at his writing, some days a page, some days a paragraph. As happened to me, he's scared, and probably has tightened up, but I think I'll be more surprised if he doesn't write another good book than if he does.

"Can I interest you in a faith-based account?"

• •

The McCarthy hearings are being televised these days, and I catch them from time to time. If you've never seen McCarthy you'll have a surprise when you do. What all his critics fail to admit is that he has enormous charm and sex appeal, and a characteristic man's man way of talking which dominates everyone around him, so that to a person ignorant of politics, he would seem just wonderful. The result is that it's truly terrifying to watch him work, because you wonder how can this man be stopped? Yet, on the other hand it's possibly not as bad as it seems, for I think a lot of his support is not active enthusiasm for his ideas, methods, etc., but simply the response of ignorant people to his vast and clever charm. The hope there is that when all the showdowns come, his minions may be startled to discover the ideas behind this guy they think is so great. The hope, I believe, is that he remain a reactionary. Just let him pick up a social program, and he'll be dictator, because as a demagogue he is really extraordinary. Even hating him, you have to admire him because he's so good at what he does. . . .

Love to you,
Norm

To Lewis Allen

April 30, 1954

Dear Lew,

. . . James Jones has been in town for a few weeks, and we've been seeing a lot of him. In a funny way I feel like the middle wheel between Styron and Jonesie—as if I'm made up of one half of each of them. And life with Jonesie has been great; with that loud brawling animal quality of his which loves life so instinctively and so warmly. I begin to feel a little warmer myself. . . .

There was a party at Styron's last night, and we all got drunk and decided to send a telegram to Joe McCarthy. So here's how it went:

DEAR JOE. WE DIG YOU, BUT GET THE BROWN OUT OF YOUR NOSE!
VANCE BOURJAILY
JAMES JONES
NORMAN MAILER
JOHN PHILLIPS
WILLIAM STYRON

Despite our mirth and our drunkenness, I think deep down we were a little aghast. It's exactly the sort of thing you go to a concentration camp for three years later. Ah, well, there are so many other reasons I can use to go. . . .

Yours, Lew,
Norm

To Jean Malaquais

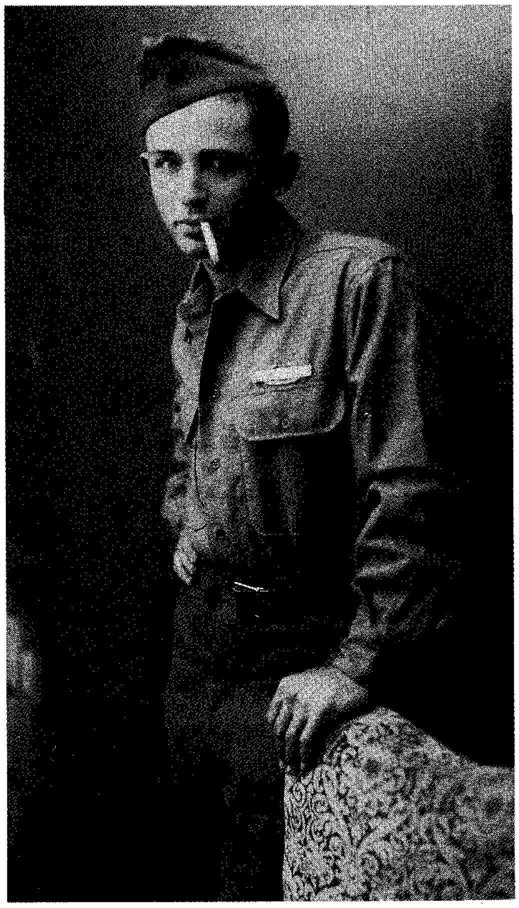
October 13, 1956

Dear Jean,

. . . It's a peculiar thing about being a radical—the years go by and lo and behold there comes a time when the phone calls don't come in any longer from one's more elevated social friends. I think simply that one's become a luxury to have as a friend, and unless they care for you very much—which none of my social friends do—you just slowly are dropped from the orbits of their circulation. And then, on top of that, I was sick of New York itself, this desperately competitive inhuman city with its violence, its coldness, its electric assault on the nerves—perhaps I'm just getting middle-aged—at any rate we went up to the country in Connecticut to visit some friends, and found a house we liked very much, and we are now in the act of buying it. . . .

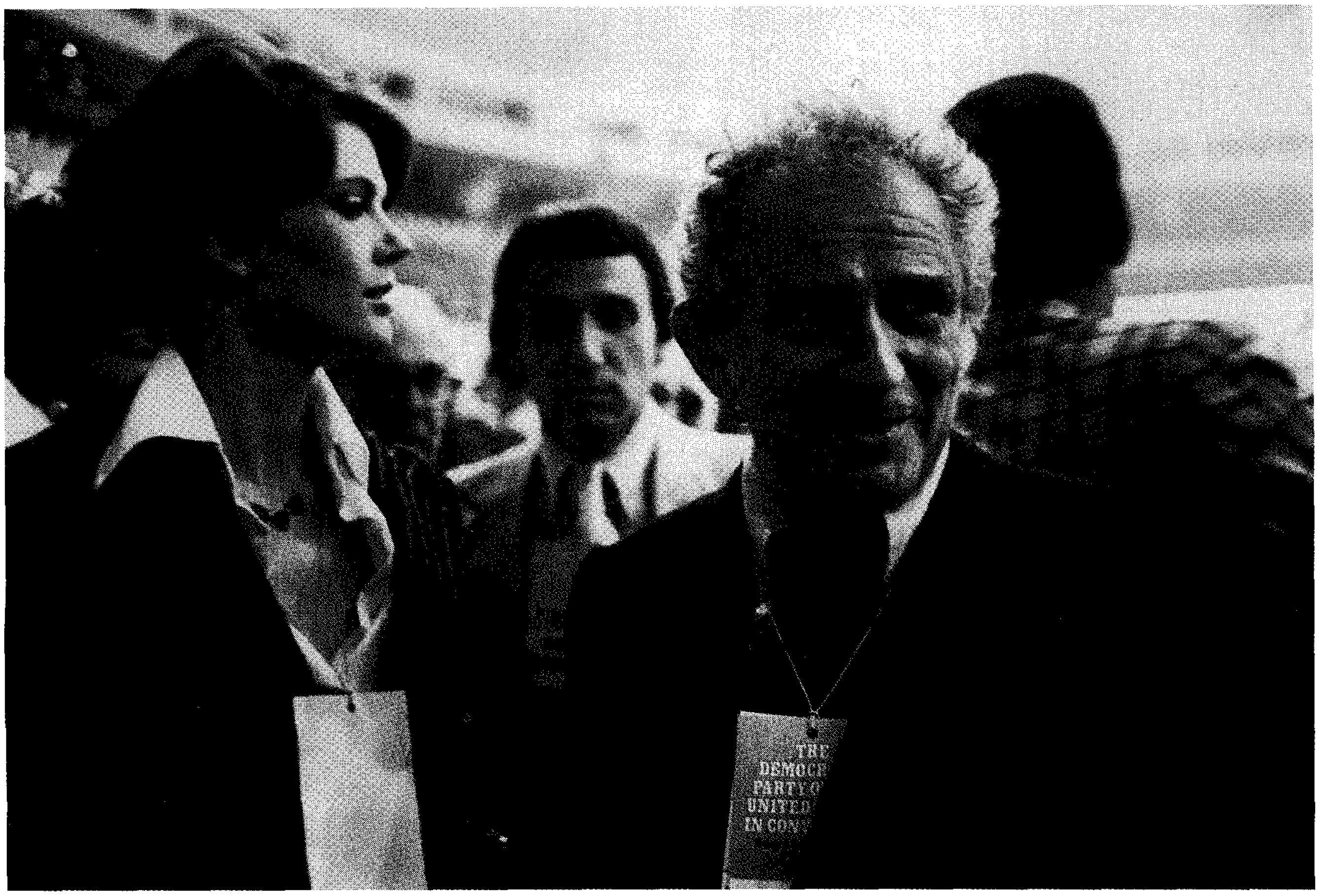
Anyway, that was a couple of weeks ago, and shortly after we made our offer to buy it, and were back in the city, I was out walking the dogs (our two big French poodles) late one Saturday night or scientifically speaking on early Sunday morning—it was one A.M.—when the dogs stopped to browse near three hoodlums who were hanging around a door step. Well, one of them made a nasty crack, the others laughed, and I who must have a touch of insanity asked the hoodlum what he said. Well, he then insulted me, we started a verbal contest, he told me to move on, I was scared but refused to, and finally we had a fight. Now I probably would have won this fight because believe me I was stronger than the hoodlum—he was tall but weighed less than me, and about 21 years old—as I say I believe I would have won, but he started to gouge my eyes in a clinch—and very professionally I may say. I threw him off as best I could, we fought a little more, clinched again, and again he gouged me. At that point a crowd of people—a gang—poured out of a house (we were fighting on the sidewalk) and some tremendous brute of a character clouted me, and said "Have you had it?"

Well I had had it. I could hardly see, my eyes were bleeding, and I could see myself being beaten to death. So I nodded hopelessly, muttered several times over, "Yes, I've had it, I've had it, I've had it," picked up the dogs from another hoodlum who ironically had been holding them during the fight, and shambled off. What keeps the story from being completely inhuman is that two colored men, part of the gang, followed me. When I got to the corner they reached me. I was past caring at that point, and so probably for that reason had no fear. My feeling was that if they were going to jump me, I might just as well be dead. Perhaps it was that, I don't know, but at any rate, one of the colored guys



Mailer in 1944 (left), before being shipped to the Pacific; in 1969 (above), running for mayor of New York, with Jimmy Breslin.
Opposite page: Mailer with his sixth wife, Norris Church Mailer, at the 1976 Democratic National Convention. Photograph by Jill Krementz.

LEFT: THE NORMAN MAILER ESTATE ARCHIVES; RIGHT: ARCHIVIO RIZZOLI/EUROPEO



said, "You didn't get a fair shake, man." And that somehow cheered me when I thought about it in the next few days.

But the aftermath was poor. My left eye hurt a bit, and I had a blind spot in the middle of my vision for a few days, and had to stay in a dark room for almost a week. Even now I suffer from eyestrain, and it will probably take a month to get over that. How happy I am that I bought the house before this happened, or else I would always feel that I was fleeing New York in a panic. . . .

Love from one old warrior to another,

Norman

To Jean Malaquais

September 25, 1957

Dear Jean,

. . . Now for my *Dissent* piece ["The White Negro"]. I sent your letter on to [Irving] Howe, and it will be printed in the next issue. I don't feel up to discussing it with you today, and indeed to answer you properly would take an article longer than the first and out of my means, but seriously, Dear Jean, entre nous, you are belaboring new if vastly imperfect ideas with a dead stick. When you write privately to me that I am suffering from inflation, I can only shake my head sadly and agree that you have put your finger on my worst fault—I want to be a great thinker without doing the work—I am indeed phony. But when you publicly say that the hipster is immature, irrational, unimportant, lumpen, etc. etc. etc. all of which is true, you are still ignoring the two important things in what I was trying to say which were 1) that barbarism may be the alternative not to socialism but to totalitarianism, and if this is true it is preferable to totalitarianism for the radical, or at the very least, poses a real alternative and 2) I was trying to fumble my way forward toward a theory of energy, human energy, which some genius following behind us may be able to pick up and use in order to become the new Marx. I do wish you would read the last page three or four times. The notion that society has reached a point of such complexity, such "organismishness" that it is capable instinctively of adapting itself to economic crisis by communicating psychological crisis via the mass communications is a notion which you cannot ignore, Jean, or you are no longer an inquiring Marxist but merely a scholastic. The contradictions from which America suffers are rapidly becoming psychological contradictions which are almost insupportable—if they should shift back to economic contradictions and economic depression which is far from impossible that will not mean that the process was a simple dialectic whose breath moved only through the circuits of productive relations. I suppose what I am fumbling toward is a dialectic which can bridge the material and the ideal—or put more palatably for you, I am trying to infuse material notions of energy into that philosophical country of the ideal which psychoanalysis now rules with a barbarian's club. . . .

Love,

Norman

To Samuel E. Lessere

December 30, 1957

Dear Mr. Lessere,

Pound's "racial hatreds" are likely to prove more embarrassing to the racists if he is on the loose than if he becomes a martyr. Frankly I don't see the point to prison, I never have—if prison is to exist as some sort of punishment for the harm one has done to others, it seems to me that until Orval Faubus has twenty years in the can, no one can argue convincingly that Pound deserves twenty minutes.

I suppose the real reason I favor Pound's release is that the same kind of government mentality which prosecutes, incarcerates, etc., a Pound also sets up Loyalty Boards, and what have you. Let it go, I doubt if we'll agree on this.

Yours,
Norman Mailer

To Jean Malaquais

December 30, 1957

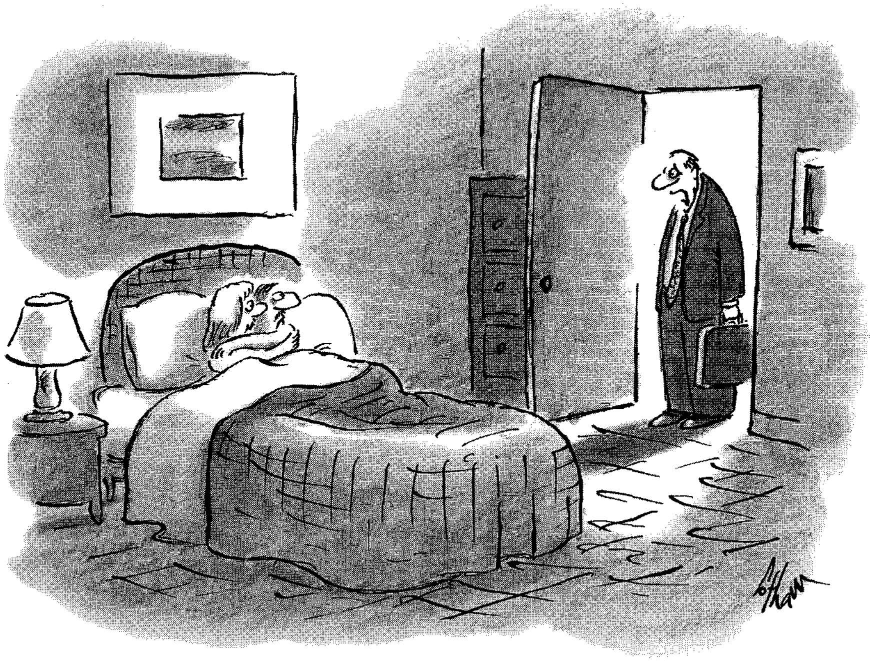
Dear Jean,

. . . Paris at the moment seems far away. We've had the country, we're bored with it, disgusted with living the unbearably contradictory life of rich squires (besides we're not so rich any more—the sputnik having nicked the cream off my investments) and so we're going back to New York. I'm rather depressed these days. It's been years since anything I've done has turned out successfully—with a few rare exceptions—and I'm falling into the thing which afflicted you a couple of years ago—a failure of the will, shall we say. My ambitions seem far beyond my talents, and light-years beyond the vicissitudes of my character, and I think of this enormous novel I'm now starting, which could well take ten years, and if done properly, it must be unpublishable except in green-backed French "dirty" editions, and I'll be middle-aged when it's done, and somehow I just don't believe in myself the way I used to, and indeed, worst of all, it doesn't even seem terribly important. I'm beginning to have the tolerance of the defeated—people I would have despised a few years ago now seem bearable—after all, I say to myself, I haven't done very well with all the luck I had, and perhaps I do wrong to judge them. Naturally these states proliferate. The desire to work recedes, and as it recedes one welcomes the depression of not working which increases the difficulty to begin work again, and it gets to be a drag. You know I think of these miserable years since the war and how everyone I know has been diminished by it, their rebellion tempered, their caution swollen to cowardice, their malice to hatred, until the worst of all is that I get close at times to thinking that perhaps we have overrated the possibilities of people, and then life becomes dreary indeed. Forgive the tirade. You have your depression, I have mine (I too am smoking again). . . .

Now, of course, all this is every artist's anguish—so many of us could have been geniuses if everything had worked out right—but I had so much more good fortune than the others, and I've fucked it away so wastefully, Jeanbon, that I don't even have the dignity of frustration—what poor little Russian émigrés we all are really. Forgive me for complaining to you, but it is better that I complain to an old, a dear, and a trusted friend than depend upon the doubtful kindnesses of a drunken stranger at a cocktail party.

(Apropos of nothing, this genius of an egoist read Baudelaire's Intimate Journals—in English—a month ago. Now there's a man, I thought, who's exactly like me.) . . .

Love to you and to Galy,
Norman


"Not on the mattress where we keep all our money!"

To Irving Howe

January 9, 1959

Dear Irving,

. . . We've never talked about it, Irving, but I've felt for some years now that Marxism may take an enormous step forward in the next fifteen or twenty years because the only intellectual discipline which can comprehend the psycho-anarchism of next year and ten years from now is indeed Marxism. The end of any theory of energy has to be society and the class conflict, not the orgone box, and I'd like you to understand that my eagerness for *Dissent* to begin a dialogue with the psycho-anarchists (wherever they are?) is not to have the magazine become by degrees a quarterly for jazz cum psychoanalysis but rather the intellectual center of a radical generation which may be coming into existence. . . .

My best,
Norman

To Jean Malaquais

April 29, 1960

Dear Jean,

. . . I joined the Fair Play for Cuba Committee on the old Leninist principle of Whom? In this case the Whom? was *Time* magazine. I figure if they're against Castro, I'm for him. Anti-Stalinism may not be a political position, but anti-Luce-ism well may be, since one can never determine the facts but only what various powers wish one to believe about the facts. I find it a good working rule of thumb to look for the center of day-to-day political evil in good old *Time* magazine. . . .

The big theater news here is "The Balcony" by Genet done at the Circle in the Square (Off Broadway). I thought the production disappointing, however. They cut the play stupidly, I thought, and the atmosphere was much too perfumed and faggy. I think some of this is Genet's fault; for all his brilliance he still gives me a pain in the ass.

Adele sends love.
Norman

To Fanny and I. B. Mailer

August 10, 1960

Dear Mom and Dad,

. . . Last Saturday I went down to Hyannis Port (50 miles from here) and had an interview with Jack Kennedy. We got along fairly well and he invited me back the next day, also invited Adele. We overslept and had to drive 80 miles an hour to get there on time. Barbara's comment was that Adele and I were the only people she knew in the whole world who could oversleep for an appointment like that. . . .

Love,
Norman

To John L. Saltonstall, Jr.

October 28, 1960

Dear Mr. Saltonstall:

Senator Kennedy's Wagnerian vision of a new American expeditionary force captained by Saint Grottlesexers and soldiered by some as yet undefined Marine Corps lumpen proletariat, for the invasion of Cuba, is insufficiently chilling to my notion of a new America a little more brave and a little more honest than the one we have sadly become accustomed to, that I do not know if I can permit my name to be used in his support without some assurance that his remarks were a perhaps forgivable mistake due to the excesses of campaigning. For all I know, Castro may now be trapped in the syndrome of the Communists, but if he is, it is a tragedy which cannot be ignored by an adventure which will prove more ugly than romantic.

Yours respectfully,
Norman Mailer

To Mrs. John F. Kennedy

November 3, 1960

Dear Mrs. Kennedy,

It was nice of you to send your letter, and I thank you for it.

Once in a while when I think of going into another century, I pick the eighteenth, France, the last three decades, and the first of the nineteenth I suppose. But I do not know if I would be very good in all of that. If, perhaps, we do get to see you in Hyannis Port next year, we might talk. I suspect you know more about the subject than me. My competence becomes inexpert once I've passed the works of the Marquis de Sade. There's a man I'd like to do a biography of when I'm dead beyond repair. I might be able to throw a hint or two on the odd strong honor of the man.

In the meantime, let me wish that I am wrong in my fear of the night of November 7. I do not agree with your husband about Cuba, I think he is moving into a serious error, but I will vote for him anyway—I think it is more important than ever that he win. It is just that I have now lost much pleasure in my ballot. . . .

Yours, dear lady,
Norman Mailer

To Eiichi Yamanishi

October 23, 1961

Dear Eiichi,

. . . I've always felt a deep kinship with Trotsky and while I no longer could call myself in any way a Trotskyite it does not mean that I do not have a profound admiration for him. The difficulty here in America is that the conventional forms of revolutionary Marxism simply do not apply to the peculiarly intricate structure of American society. By this I do not mean that Marxism no longer applies but only that for it to become exciting again as a style of thought for the best of the young people it must be expanded by some genius who can comprehend the complexities of the American phenomena. I think in a way I was trying to point toward a possible direction in the last paragraph of "The White Negro." You see, Eiichi, the difficulty is that the working class in America is utterly without a revolutionary consciousness and the source of whatever rebellion there is in this country comes, not from people who function within the economy, but from the growing number of young people who feel profoundly alienated from their country and its history. It is possible that something may come of all this in the next ten years, for the spirit of rebellion is genuine. It is just that none of us has the intellectual stature to conceive of the problem in a radical new way. In America it is not that surplus value is extorted from us so much as that we are spiritually exploited and denied the opportunity to find our true growth. This is no doubt the highest stage of capitalism. You can see that in a situation like this it makes little sense to think of oneself as a Trotskyite. One might as easily call oneself a Bourbon or a follower of Batko Makhno. I am certain that if Trotsky were alive and in this country he would no longer be a Trotskyite. . . .

Warmly,
Norman

To the Editor of Playboy

December 21, 1962

Dear Sir,

I wish you hadn't billed the debate between William Buckley and myself as a meeting between a conservative and a liberal. I don't care if people call me a radical, a rebel, a red, a revolutionary, an outsider, an outlaw, a Bolshevik, an anarchist, a nihilist, or even a left conservative, but please don't ever call me a liberal.

Yours,
Norman Mailer

To Mickey Knox

December 17, 1963

Dear Mickey,

The Kennedy thing hit very hard here. Women were crying in the streets (mainly good-looking women), a lot of middle-aged Negroes looked sad and very worried, and then we all sat around in gloom and watched the television set for the next seventy-two hours. Altogether it was one of three events having something profoundly in common: Pearl Harbor day and the death of Roosevelt being the other two. And the Ruby-Oswald stuff was just too much on top of it. I haven't felt like writing a word about the whole thing, I've been too fucking depressed every which way. The main loss I think was a cultural one. Whether he wanted to or not Kennedy was giving a great boost to the arts, not because Jackie Kennedy was inviting Richard Wilbur to the White House, but somehow the lid was off, and now I fear it's going to be clamped on tight again.

As for Oswald and Ruby, I don't know what was going on, but I don't have the confidence we'll ever know. I'd like to believe that the F.B.I. had a sinister hand in all of this, but somehow I doubt it. I suspect the real story is that two lonely guys, all by themselves, put more grit in the gears than anyone ever succeeded in doing before, and it's just a mess, a dull miserable mess. . . .

Love
Norm

To Eiichi Yamanishi

April 17, 1964

Dear Eiichi,

. . . As for the debate [with William F. Buckley, Jr.], it caused some interest, but not an overwhelming amount. It lacked the incisiveness of the first debate and ended inconclusively. I was furious at myself for not having taken the time to prepare properly. As a result I was on the defensive a good deal of the time because Buckley has a knowledge of contemporary politics, names, dates, places, so forth, which one cannot match casually. A lot of people were kind enough afterward to tell me that I won. The newspapers were all on Buckley's side. And between us two, I think I must confess that the best I obtained in the second debate was a draw. . . .

As for Trotsky, it is not that I feel antipathetic to him, indeed I think he is one of the few great figures of the twentieth century, and I've always felt sympathetically close to him, but the Trotsky movement in America is unspeakably arid and hidebound. Indeed one hardly hears of their existence any longer. Besides, there are political phenomena in America which Marx could never have contemplated, for the continued survival of capitalism displaced the economic imbalance into a psychic imbalance which corrupts the very being of people's lives here. Indeed, it is almost profitable to conceive of America as one vast horde of psychic totalitarians ruled by an establishment which is exceptionally self-contradictory; for while on the one hand it pushes America toward totalitarianism, there are elements in the establishment which offer our greatest defense against the continuing totalitarianization of the masses. Kennedy, for all his contradictions, was probably a defense of that sort, whereas Johnson, who has almost virtually the same political program, encourages the drift toward totalitarianism by the vacuity of his personality. The key to the entire situation is the Negro revolution, I believe. If it fails, and it most certainly can, even via the route of the next Presidential election, then the legal counter-revolution is, I fear, in the making. America is like a sullen attic full of smoldering dull heats. We can go on like this for years, but then again the fire can break out in six months. For we are in a profound crisis psychologically, since the country as it sees itself was founded and prospered on ideas of faith and reason, and faith has now become shattered or authoritarian, or the average American has lost his confidence in reason. The assassination of Kennedy did untold harms. The assassination of Oswald multiplied the disaster many times again. . . .

Warmly,
Norman

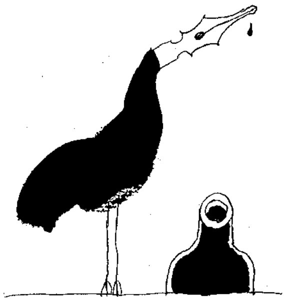
To Arnold Kemp

December 18, 1964

Dear Arnold,

. . . You know, when Sartre won the Nobel Prize, it's funny, but we have a different attitude. I think he should have taken it, and the reason I think is that it bugs the bourgeoisie more when people who are against them accept their biggest prizes rather than refuse them. For example, all these years *Life* magazine has been calling Jean-Paul Sartre an "apostle of despair." Now all of a sudden, apostle of despair and Nobel Prize winner. That makes it harder for them to bullshit people. I believe in taking honors because if you use them properly they are you. Some day if there were something really big going on and one wanted to write a letter to the New York *Times*, a mean stinging letter, and get it printed, there'd be just that much more leverage. . . .

Best,
Norman



To Eiichi Yamanishi

December 21, 1964

Dear Eiichi,

. . . I'm glad you liked the piece on the Republican Convention ["In the Red Light," in *Esquire*]. For some reason, I think mainly because Goldwater is so hated here, the piece was enormously well received. As I wrote to someone earlier today, it inspired more favorable comment than anything I've done since "The Naked and the Dead." I asked myself what I could have done wrong that it is so popular. Actually, what no one understands is that it is easy to write political pieces once one has had the good fortune to read "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon" at an early age. Anyway, there is talk here now of publishing it as a book. If that is done, I will restore its original title: "Cannibals and Christians, A History of the Republican Convention of 1964." *Esquire* was so afraid of a libel suit from the people of the Republican party that they refused to use that title, which was of course annoying for me, because it meant that once again I would have to sever relations with *Esquire* and I had enjoyed working with them up to that point. However, those decisions are not negotiable. I'm afraid I can't write for them again until they agree that I have absolute right to have my own title. . . .

Norman

To William F. Buckley, Jr.

April 20, 1965

Dear Bill,

What a marvelous girl Joan Didion must be. I think that's one conservative I would like to meet. And who would ever have thought that the nicest piece [review of "An American Dream"] I am to read about myself four weeks after publication should come in the *National Review*. Well, this is the year of literary wonders. What do you think the odds

TAG

THIS

Insatiable April, trees in place,
in their scraped-out place,
their standing.
Standing way.
Their red branch areas,
green shoot areas (shock),
river, that one.
I surprised a goose and she hissed.
I walk and walk with cold hands.
Back at the house it is filled with longing,
nothing to carry longing away.
I look back over my life.
I try to find analogies.
There are none.
I have longed for people before, I have loved people before.
Not like this.
It was not this.

Give me a world, you have taken the world I was.

YOUR

("unalterable")
Actually not. Feigned leap into—
river glimpsed through bare
[waiting]
[some noun] for how thought breaks up around you not here
your clothes not wet in this deep mirror—
what Hölderlin calls *die Tageszeichen*, signs
                                        scored into the soul by the god of each day
your *answer scars*, I still don't know—
years from now, these
notations in the address book, this frantic hand.

—*Anne Carson*

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would have been for a parlay of good reviews in *National Review*, *Life*, the New York *Times* Sunday *Book Review*, Paul Pickrel at *Harper's*, and the Chicago *Tribune*. One hundred fifty million to one, or would we have picked it by light-years?

Anyway, I write you this letter in great envy. I think you are going finally to displace me as the most hated man in American life. And of course that position is bearable only if one is number one. To be the second most hated man in the picture will probably prove to be a little like working behind a mule for years, which brings me to your address before the police department's Holy Name Society. I missed all of it at the time; I was in Alaska, and got my first inkling in the New York *Post* that some sort of bomb had gone off. At any rate I was not surprised when I read your speech today to find that it was literate, moderate in relation to your own position, and felicitously phrased. And of course I don't agree with your fundamental premise. On that I think you're all wrong. I'm not the cop-hater I'm reputed to be, and in fact police fascinate me. But this is because I think their natures are very complex, not simple at all, and what I would object to in your speech if we were debating is that you made a one-for-one correspondence between the need to maintain law and order and the nature of the men who would maintain it. The policeman has I think an extraordinarily tortured psyche. He is perhaps more tortured than the criminal, and so as you can see I can hardly concur with the valuations you put on these matters. At the same time there's no doubt in my mind that the newspapers misquoted you shamefully and the net result of that is to deepen one's sense of an oncoming disaster; for I think humanly it could only drive you further into some of your own most charming surrealisms, such as bombing China's atomic plants. Truly you amaze me, Bill. Did it ever occur to you as a good Christian that it is immoral to destroy somebody else's property?

But listen, I think our public debating days are probably over—for a time at least. As wrestlers we are not both villains, and that excites no proper passions. Still, it may open something interesting—which is that the two of us have a long careful private discussion one night, because I think in all modesty there's much in your thought which is innocent of its own implications, and there's much surplus in mine which could profitably be sliced away by the powers of your logic. . . .

Incorrigibly yours,
Norman

To William F. Buckley, Jr.
October 18, 1965

Dear Bill-elect,

What the hell does emunctory mean? You have here gone too far, sir, even for Buckley. I even heard one Roman turn over distinctly in his grave as the word went by and whisper to his neighbor, "Does that 'emunctory' come from the Greek?" Anyway, you're just an old fraud. You offered to pay a week's wages not to have to hear anyone who talks more predictable nonsense on the subject of foreign policy than myself. Sailor Bill, I come close to loving you here. When the hell did you ever earn a week's wages, you bleeding plutocrat. Of course if you were really indicating you were ready to give up one-fifty-second of your yearly income, then I will go look for such an intellectual and split the swag with him. . . .

Last, how is Patsy's leg? I hope it's back to everything original. Please give her my love, and let me know about dinner. We still have one to offer you. I expect you'll find it easier after the election, but if you think we can plan anything before, fine, and fine again.

Norman

To William F. Buckley, Jr.

January, 1966

Dear Bill,

I send you the enclosed not because I love *National Review* so much, for I don't—it's not so good as it ought to be, and often it's tiresome, especially when one knows in advance what your trusted old line contributors are going to say—but as a personal mark of respect to you. Your letter was the best letter I ever read by an editor asking for funds. . . .

One request. Please keep my contribution in the secret crypts. It is not that I fear public opinion so much as ceaseless repetition. Repetition kills the soul and I would not wish to spend one hundred evenings in succession explaining to various outraged and somewhat stupid people in calm clear fashion my complex motives for giving a gift to a magazine for which I feel no affection and to an editor with whom on ninety of a hundred points I must rush to disagree. They would not understand that good writing is good writing, and occasionally carries the day.

Yours,
Norman

To Diana Trilling

June, 1966

Dear Diana,

. . . You ask in effect if we, as friends, have any real sense of one another; if I address you as *the real Diana Trilling*, and whether by extension you address the real Norman Mailer, and I get so angered when I read this that I decide you probably are the great conservative, because who indeed outside of English dons and Diana Trilling still think of people as residing in the real. When I talk to you, I talk to you naturally with a firm "idea" of who you are, but since every mother's son and mother alive is in part a scientist, or at least a rational philosopher, a sensitive part of my brain is presumably reacting to the idea and seeing where it is wrong and where perhaps it is right. But even this is to pay too much service to your notion. I don't make friends with people because they satisfy my idea of them. I am friends with people because they make me feel good when I talk to them and since everything on earth is extraordinarily limited I often don't want even to have too good an idea of them. I don't want to have too much of a hypothesis to be proved or disproved—rather there's an animal pleasure in friends. One feels a little safer or a little merrier, one shores up a small bulkhead against the large dread that always waits outside the doors so if we're friends it's not because we necessarily have a good idea of what the implications of the other's thoughts might be, but because we are simpatico. Because in a funny way we are family, as opposed to the other sorts of friends who start as associates. For that reason I think it is no accident that we've never had a serious political conversation. Each of us is all too aware that it might be harder to remain friends afterward. Yet I see no inconsistency in this. Your ideas would have a negative importance to me if I did not believe in your good will and good conscience, just as my ideas would be finally intolerable to you if you did not believe in my essential good intent. What I think it comes down to is that our experiences have been so different that ultimate ideas are much at odds, but to me this is far less important than the fact that we have a friendship. That is what is real. I've never for a moment considered whether I'm talking to the *real Diana Trilling*, because I know damn well I am, you damn adolescent, and the way I know is that I have the clearest impression of not knowing who I'm talking to when I'm with someone that I don't know, which is to say, that I don't feel comfortable with. Besides, I feel your ideas and my ideas are going to become more and more unimportant. There's something going on which I don't think I understand anymore, and I used to have a confidence that I understood the times better than anyone, but now I just don't know. These McLuhans, these Pynchons and Jeremy Larners and this love of electronics and plastic and folk/rock make me feel like Plekhanov's scolding of the Soviets in 1917. Sometimes I think we're at the tail end of something which soon may be gone forever, so that in 50 years, for instance, there may not be anyone alive who's read all of "Remembrance of Things Past." See how gloomy I am. Why indeed should I give a damn what

"A banker, eh? Can you make a living at that?"

my friends' ideas are—indeed let them cherish them for a while, they don't matter any more than my own ideas. What I do know is that the majority of people among whom you spent your intellectual life, and they are the Communists of the '40s who form up a large part of this, had an aridity of invention and sterility of emotion which had everything to do with preparing the ground for the extraordinary nihilism which is now near upon us, because with rare exceptions, and Lionel would be one of the very rare ones, they offered no fertile continuations of Western thought—their best and final tool was a savage, even cannibalistic malice. . . .

Love for now,
Norman

To Jean Malaquais

July 9, 1967

Dear Jean,

. . . I have a general theory the act was committed by a petty conspirator or conspirators & Oswald was at least associated with it. He was also, I would hypothesize, a petty agent for more than one American secret police—let us say CIA & FBI, and also a petty agent for one or two other countries. So the history of the Warren Commission proceedings is the history of a series of attempts to conceal, by multitudinous layers of meaningless evidence, the simple contradictions attaching to the embarrassments of the various secret policemen when lo and behold one of their boys seemed to be at the gun. Plus other waves and layers of distorted evidence, Dallas police, Jack Ruby, etc. . . .

Norman

To Marvin Gorson

April 11, 1968

Dear Marvin,

. . . I don't think I'll take up your kind invitation to become the philosopher-in-residence for the Peace and Freedom Party for two of the best reasons possible. I can't quite think my way clear to a coherent political position. As you may or may not know I'm a left-conservative, which involves such contradictions as being against urban renewal, but on the other hand not necessarily being for legalization of marijuana. I may have to come out for legalization of marijuana. I may have to come out for legalization if the police keep harassing people and arresting them unnecessarily, but with all that I prefer it to be illegal for it gives a touch of spice to the smoking and saves us from the corporation being able to put vitamins in the hydroponically grown and hybrid hyped marijuana with filters. Not to mention all the psychedelic commercials we'll be spared. Also I'm not so sure that McCarthy and Kennedy are indistinguishable from Humphrey, who if nothing else ought to pay for his total commitment to the war in Vietnam. It's all very well to say that there's no difference between Kennedy and Johnson, but I'm not at all sure I agree. It doesn't matter so much what goes on in Kennedy's head, as that you'll have a totally different country if a man who wears his hair the way he does becomes our President. . . .

Yours,
Norman

To Allen Ginsberg

December 9, 1969

Dear Allen,

. . . This is just to say love to your manse and three cheers for the organic farming.

Yours sincerely,
Norman

P.S. People keep asking me to do pieces on what I think the '70s will be like. Do you know I don't have the remotest idea. We were sure of what would happen in the '60s and we weren't far from wrong. The '70s are just a fearful blank to me. I hope it's age rather than presentiments. Merry Christmas dear poet.

To Eiichi Yamanishi

December 5, 1975

Dear Eiichi,

. . . Our political situation here is curiously flat. There's no great excitement anywhere and there seems in manners and mores and morals to be a return to the center. More and more young radicals I used to know, who saw sex, for example, as a completely rational activity to be pursued for one's own pleasure, are now turning in the other direction and speak wistfully of finding a mate with whom they can suffer and die. The one thing one seems able to depend upon in American life is that the pendulum will operate. I must say that I've always been particularly sensitive to the pendulum, since I always seem to be swinging in the opposite direction from it.

As for city politics, Ford acted in disgusting fashion over the troubles of New York, and carried on as if there were something personally corrupt and deficient in the soul of New Yorkers themselves. When one puts his remarks against the unspeakable waste of the war in Vietnam, the various debauches of the oil fields, the absolute dissipation of energy in every endeavor of American and corporate and international financial life, one's old sense of anger comes back again. I've had the grim and funny satisfaction of having people stop me on the street in New York from time to time now and say to me, "I wish I'd voted for you six years ago. You are a prophet." To which I always laugh and say, "Listen, if I had been elected you'd be blaming me now for all this trouble." No, my life is simple, I do not have political ambition, I have only one, which is to get to that novel. . . .

Warmly,
Norman

To Mary Bancroft

October 18, 1976

Dear Mary,

. . . I find it hard to burn with your passion about Carter, for I have only to think of Ford or, God save my ass, Reagan, and wonder how a self-respecting conservative like you can get it up one more time to put the dipper in the bile pot. Yes, I think Carter is ambiguous as hell and yes he could be the devil and yes he could sure have taken me in and yes the Democrats will take us to war before the Republicans and yes it could be the biggest mistake I've ever made, but all I could tell you is I've learned over the years to get simpler and simpler. I decided it's finally no accident if I walk away liking somebody or not liking them. Rather, everything that's happened to me in my purchase on fifty-three years is in the judgment. And I walked away from Carter and I really liked him, he stayed with me in a good glow. Not many people do that to me. Since that part is incontestable for me, I have to recognize that if he is the devil, then so am I, and it was that good glow of fellowship devils feel when they encounter one another in high and secret places. But as for Ford, Reagan, Dole and the rest of that pirate ship—Mary, they're puke. They're hideous. Don't you know what they've done to this country? Johnson was a tragic monstrosity and he got us into Vietnam ten times as much as Kennedy—I'll grant you that. But what Nixon did in not getting us out for four long years is unspeakable, and what Ford and Reagan do in terms of the economy that is run by the guys who roll around in the golf cart, oh the corruption, oh the ooze, oh I miss you. Oh god I miss you. Mary, why do I never visit? . . .

Love,
Norman

To Richard Stratton

Early January, 1987

Dear Rick,

. . . Norris and I were invited to Moscow for that conference Gorbachev called. Rick, I tell you, it's incredible: there is something happening over there. It's as a bear, old, smelly, wounded all over the place, obese, matted in his own corruptions, and there's a look in the bear's eye: he wants to go back to the circus, he wants to be a trained bear and receive applause, and be honored by all the other animals. This is too fancy a way to put it, but in fact, I guess I've been brooding about Russia ever since "The Naked and the Dead" came out, because I went through the experience of so many in my generation, of thinking the Russians were great during the World War and respecting their army and their infantry as only an American infantryman could, and their war sacrifices, and then being plunged into the Cold War and all the signals being reversed. I didn't trust anyone after that, including the Russians when I got to Lenin about Stalinism and the real horrors that are there. There is one difference between Russians and Americans that is crucial: in America we keep running ahead of our guilt. We stay ahead of it by technique, by every trendy step. We're analyzed, tranquilized, and roboticized, nouvelle cuisine-ized, yuppified, we stay ahead of our anxiety and our great guilt and are able to avoid the issue. The Russians aren't. They're marooned in their guilt and there are very few Russians who don't have a bad conscience because the history of that place for 30 years required one to turn on friends, not overly perhaps, but through acts of omission, not helping friends who run afoul of the authorities. And authority itself kept stalling in its own huge bad conscience. The Russians, I think, live closer to their souls than we do because they're guilty, and I can't tell you how moving it is that out of the top bureaucracy itself has come this recognition that they've got to change and have a more human government. Rick, I tell you, if I were the kind of guy to pray, I think I'd even ask for good will from above so that unbelievable thing that Gorbachev is attempting in Russia, and brother, I feel for him. It could go wrong so easily, but if it goes right, this country, our country, America is going to have to cut out so much of its own bullshit and come face to face with the idea, if Communism becomes democratic, that our own stables are overflowing. And our horseshit is reaching our nostrils. Well let's see.

Three cheers,
Norman

To Don DeLillo

August 25, 1988

Dear Don,

What a terrific book ["Libra"]. I have to tell you that I read it against the grain. I've got an awfully long novel going on the CIA, and of course it overlapped just enough that I kept saying, "this son of a bitch is playing my music," but I was impressed, damned impressed, which I very rarely am. I think we keep ourselves writing by allowing the core of our vanity never to be scratched if we can help it, but I didn't get away scot-free this time. Wonderful virtuoso stuff all over the place, and, what is more, I think you're fulfilling the task we've just about all forgotten, which is that we're here to change the American obsessions—those black holes in space—into mantras that we can live with. What you've given us is a comprehensible, believable, vision of what Oswald was like, and what Ruby was like, one that could conceivably have happened. Whether history will find you more wrong than right is hardly to the point: what counts is that you brought life back to a place in our imagination that has been surviving all these years like scorched earth, that is, just about. It's so rare when novel writing offers us this deep purpose and I swear, Don, I salute you for it.

Cheers,
Norman Mailer

To Florence Bonanno

December 4, 1996

Dear Florence,

. . . I, too, like Dole but I ended up voting for Clinton mainly because I think if anyone can close the gap between black and white in America, Clinton has that possibility. Black people do trust him. He has a certain regard for them; I think it's the nicest part of his character.

Dole I like personally and, of course, we're the same age so I identified with his troubles. But, Florence, you know, he just never came to grips with any real problems. He kept saying the same things over and over, really. The fact of the matter . . . for me, is that the Republican Party is profoundly divided between those who believe in family values like yourself, I expect, and those who believe in a free market. And the two are absolutely divided. You could fit the Democratic Party between them. So I expect that Dole in trying to bring the two halves of the Party together just didn't dare to say anything too revealing of the huge split that exists and so he got less and less interesting in what he had to say. And that's not good for a President. If Nader had been on the ticket up in Massachusetts, I think I would have voted for him. . . .

Cheers,
Norman

To Sal Cetrano

March 28, 1999

Dear Sal,

. . . While the Democrats, and Clinton first, disgust me with what I call their "boutique politics"—a little bit here, a little bit there, and served with loads of bullshit slathered over it—the Republicans are a psychotic monstrosity. On the one hand, they're God, flag, and family—although few of them would know Jesus Christ if he were standing at the next urinal pissing along with them—and an astonishing number never served in the armed forces nor heard a bullet, and being politicians, they cheat like jackrabbits on their wives and families. But all right, what's the use of being a politician if you can't make a living at being a hypocrite? The point is: the Republican Party is schizophrenic: on the one hand, they are, as I say, for God, flag and family, but on the other, they are for the unbridled expansion of capitalism, and thereby leave out something that might still be important to you which is that Jesus, like Karl Marx, thought money leaches out all other values. Indeed, it does. If the whole country is going to pot, and it certainly is, I think you could graph the decline not only in morals, but in a sense of social éclat and social standards—I think you could plot the decline right next to the rise of the Dow Jones—the higher the Dow, the lower the standards. Money destroys all other values. I can even respect the right wing Republicans for holding to a few standards, as they do, but they never take on capitalism which, unbridled, is the worst scourge of human value that we have right now. There may have been a time when Communism was a worse scourge, but now we're the leaders, and I suggest you consider living with the notion that the party of your choice is paralyzed in its moral centers. . . .

Cheers, old buddy,
Norman

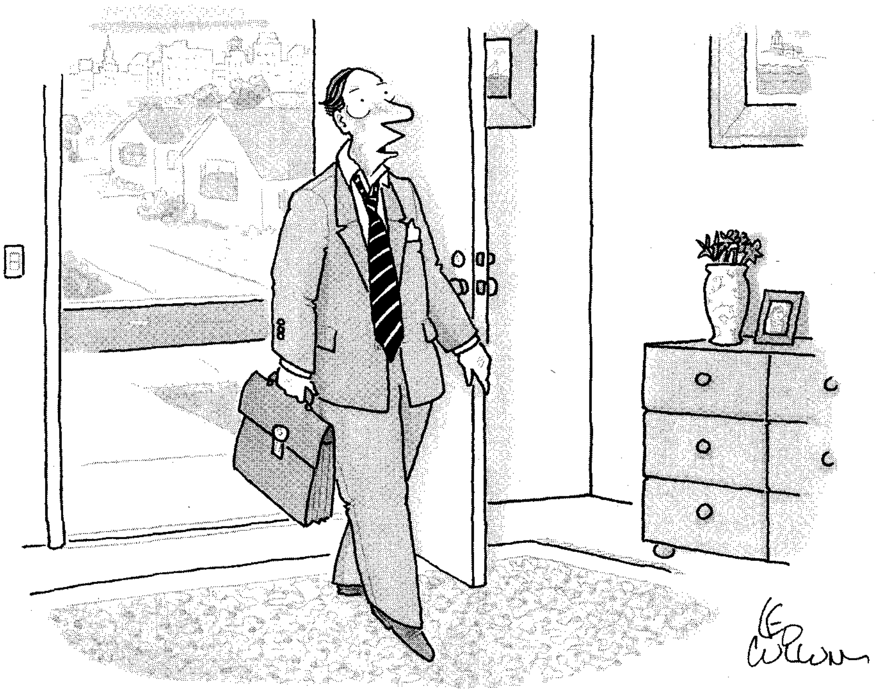
To the Editor of the Boston Globe

March 13, 2002

George F. Will writes (Boston *Globe*, March 12): "Bush's terseness is Ernest Hemingway seasoned with John Wesley."

Well, one is hardly familiar with John Wesley's sermons, but I do know that to put George W. Bush's prose next to Hemingway's is equal to saying that Jackie Susann is right up there with Jane Austen. Did a sense of shame ever reside in our Republican toadies? You can't stop people who are never embarrassed by themselves. George Will's readiness to turn a sow's ear into a silk purse can be cited as world-class sycophancy. . . .

Norman Mailer



"Honey, we're homeless."

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To Sal Cetrano

June 17, 2003

Dear Sal,

. . . Even if you're a deep-dyed conservative, and Republican, please disabuse yourself of the idea that Bush is a good guy. Please, Sal. It seems to me the best argument you can present is that he's a total, shallow, manipulative shit, but that he's got the luck of the devil working for him and so his policy may not end up a total disaster. . . .

Cheers,
Norman

To Emmerich Kusztrich

January 26, 2005

Dear Imre,

It was so thoughtful of you to send me the piece on arthritis of the knees. I find that as time goes by I am able to live more and more easily with the condition. Two canes—and I'm not merely being cute—are kind of fun once you learn some of their dimensions. The key pleasure is that you can have the illusion that you are going in for cross country skiing and poling along and that is great fun. Moreover, you never have to stand for long; there is always somebody offering you their seat.

Sans façons, I hope to get back to Germany sometime in the next year and look forward to visiting with you and Gertrude again and we can talk about the operation at that point. I don't feel in deep need of it at this hour, but these things change from time to time. It will be one of a hundred things we can talk about. I read the clipping you sent me from the *Financial Times* and it is grim. I don't know where we are all heading. This is the first century that weighs upon us like an incubus. In the twentieth century it was the terror that we would all be blown up by nuclear war. But it seems surrealistic. Now, in the twenty-first, this heavy notion is present among so many that we may or may not reach the end of this century in something like our present condition. At my age it makes so little difference, but I do have nine children and a number of grandchildren and the prospect is hardly full of joy for them.

Forgive me for this visit to world doom. I got carried away, I fear. But I also want to say what I've said before; we hardly know each other and yet we feel like good friends. That is a most agreeable condition. Cheers, to you and Gertrude, and dare I say it?—a little love.

Norman ♦

A REPORTER AT LARGE

THE STOLEN FORESTS

Inside the covert war on illegal logging.

BY RAFFI KHATCHADOURIAN

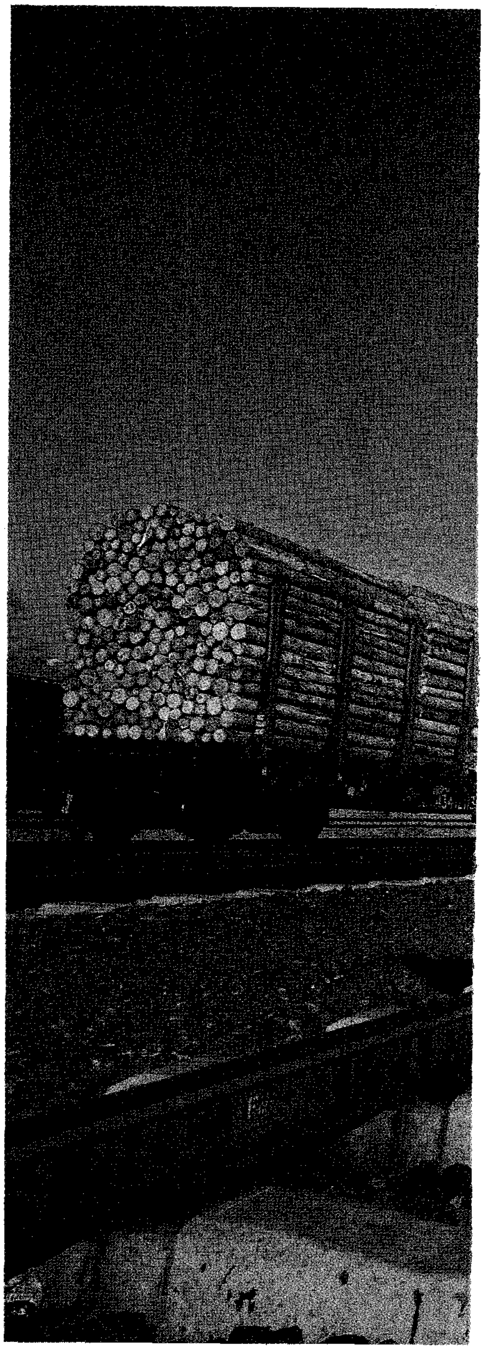
The town of Suifenhe, a former Russian imperial outpost on the Trans-Siberian Railway, has belonged to China since the nineteen-forties, and occupies a broad valley in northern Manchuria. From a distance, its homes and factories appear to cling to a rail yard, with tracks fanning out into a vast latticework of iron as they emerge from the Russian border. Suifenhe is a place of singular purpose. Nearly every train from Russia brings in just one commodity: wood—oak, ash, linden, and other high-value species. There is also poplar, aspen, and larch, and occasionally great trunks of Korean pine, a species that was logged by the Soviets until there was almost none left to cut down. In a year, more than five billion pounds of wood cross over from Primorski Krai, the neighboring province in the Russian Far East. Hundreds of railcars enter Suifenhe every day, many loaded beyond capacity with logs. The wood is shuttled between mills by hand, often six men to a log. Other workers, many of whom are migrants from elsewhere in China, operate cranes to empty the rail carriages, and at sundown they bring the machinery to rest, with beams pointing upward, like arms outstretched, waiting for the rush of timber that will arrive the following day.

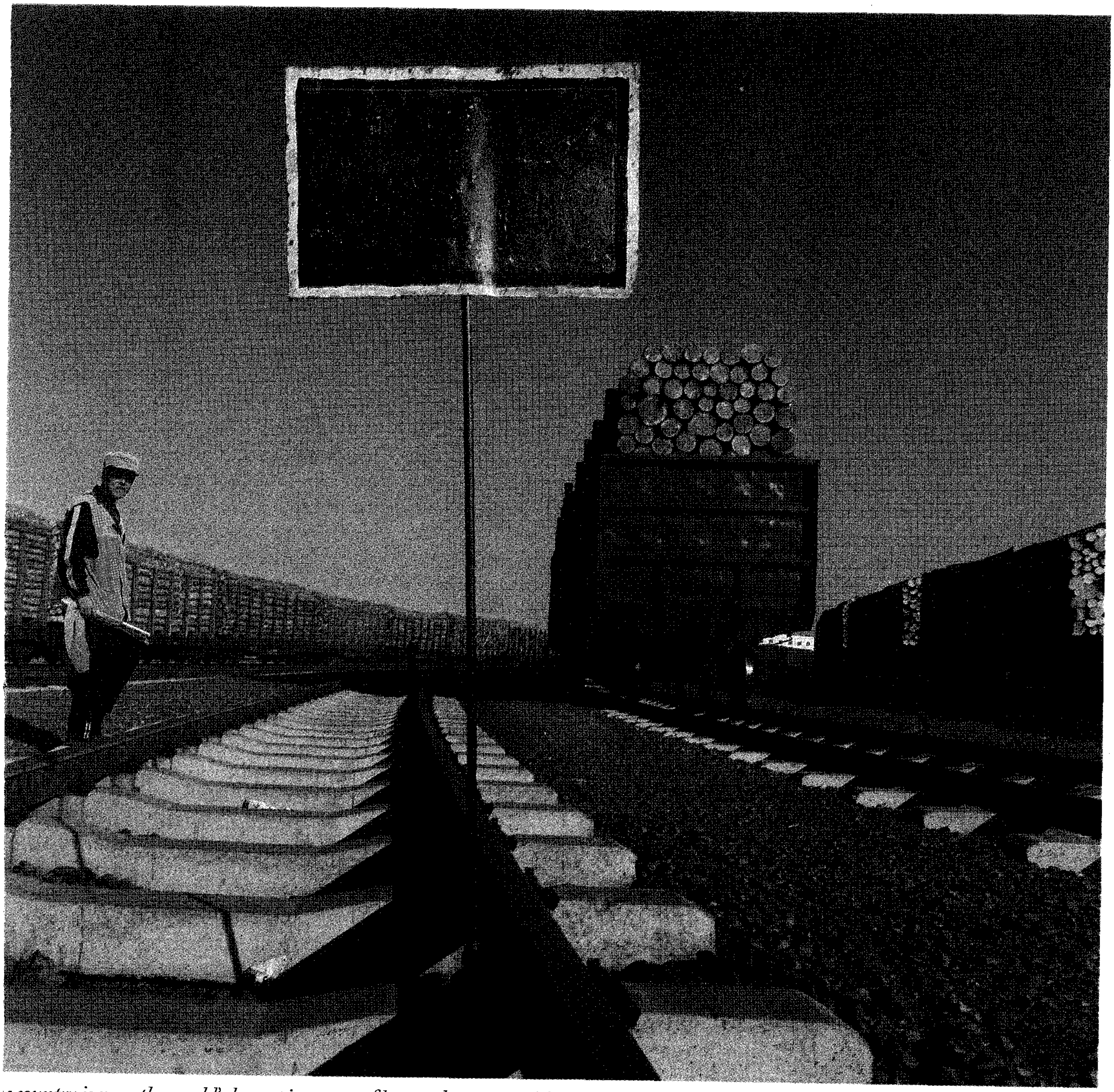
On a warm afternoon last May, an environmental activist named Alexander von Bismarck and a man whom I will call Wu De entered Suifenhe by taxi. They had brought with them surveillance equipment; they were working for a nonprofit group called the Environmental Investigation Agency, which tries to uncover how plants, wildlife, and industrial chemicals are smuggled. Von Bismarck is the organization's executive director, and one of the world's leading experts on timber smuggling. He is thirty-six years old, trim and tall, with fiery red hair, but he possesses a quiet bearing that allows him to recede in a crowd. (Most people know him as Sascha, but a few friends call him RoboCop, because once, while in the tropics, he insisted on jogging in hundred-degree heat.) Wu is from Southeast Asia, but he is fluent in Mandarin Chinese. Both men had prepared false identities, as employees of Axion Trading—one of several companies created by E.I.A. as fronts.

Chances are good that if an item sold in the United States was recently made in China using oak or ash, the wood was imported from Russia through Suifenhe. Because as much as half of the hardwood from Primorski Krai is harvested in violation of Russian law—either by large companies working with corrupt provincial officials or by gangs of men in remote villages—it is likely that any given piece of wood in the city has been logged illegally. This wide-scale theft empowers mafias, robs the Russian government of revenue, and assists in the destruction of one of the most precious ecosystems in the Northern Hemisphere. Lawmakers in the province have called for "emergency measures" to stem the flow of illegal wood, and Russia's Minister of Natural Resources has said that in the region "there has emerged an entire criminal branch connected with the preparation, storage, transportation, and selling of stolen timber."

When von Bismarck and Wu arrived in Suifenhe, they saw traces of this immense crime—a destructive black market merging into the global economy. This is what they had come to investigate.

John le Carré once described a spy as a "silent spectator," someone who builds himself a persona from "all the odd bits of his life that are left over after he has given the rest away." When constructing his aliases, von Bismarck often draws upon his personal history. (He has asked me not to explain which bits, so as not to ruin his cover.) As the great-great-grandnephew of Otto von Bismarck, the Iron Chancellor, he can trace his genealogy back at least seven hundred years. He is the grandson of Klaus von Bismarck, a German military officer who fought during the Second World War but was a staunch anti-Nazi who later became president of the Goethe-Institut. Sascha's father, Gottfried, is a business executive and engineer who helped equip West German submarines with sonar. His mother, Kai Maristed, is an American novelist—a daughter of James Abegglen, who served in the Pacific as a


Timber in the train station at Suifenhe, Chi



e country is now the world's largest importer of logs and exporter of finished wood products. Photograph by Lu Guang.

marine and later became a specialist on Japanese business culture and a vice-president of the Boston Consulting Group. Sascha was born in Munich, but his parents divorced soon afterward, and, following a difficult custody battle, he split his youth between Germany and the United States. He said, "There was this sort of existence of going back and forth between two poles, two very different worlds, and arriving in this other camp, and loving both sides, and speaking to both sides, and becoming very aware of the hurt on both sides."

Von Bismarck developed a quiet manner and an unwavering earnestness. He entered Harvard in 1990, with an interest in biology, but he was restless and repeatedly took time off. He tried his hand at competitive horse jumping and thought that the Olympics might be a realistic goal. He assisted in a study of aquatic life in Lake Victoria. He joined the Marines, hoping to become involved in military intelligence, but left after two years. When he first learned about E.I.A., in 1995, from an article in a German newspaper, he immediately flew to its main office, in London, for an interview, again ready to suspend college. (He graduated from Harvard in 2002.) "The office was like a newsroom," he recalled. "Everyone was running around and screaming and taking calls." At the time, E.I.A. was a little more than ten years old. Its founders—Allan Thornton, an environmentalist from Canada; Dave Currey, a photographer from the United Kingdom; and Jennifer Lonsdale, a former cook—had ties to Greenpeace, and were influenced by its aggressiveness, but felt lost in its size. Thornton had considered calling their organization the Conservation Investigation Agency, he told me, but ruled it out because the initials "would be a never-ending joke." Still, E.I.A. is sometimes mistaken for a government agency, "which is normally not to our advantage," von Bismarck said. "Once, while going up a river in the Mosquito Coast, we tried to radio a pilot to tell him who we were: E.I.A. He told us that listening in on those calls were drug smugglers, and he was certain they thought we were American agents trying to stop the cocaine coming through. We had even seen cocaine floating in the lagoons."

Not long after he joined the organization, von Bismarck began working on campaigns designed to curtail deforestation. Currently, a third of the world's landmass is forested, which may seem substantial but represents a stark historical decline. During the past ten thousand years, the planet's original forest cover has decreased by nearly half. While Rome grew, Horace wrote of the farmer who "subdues his woodland with flames and plow." In medieval China, the poet Mencius described "bald" landscapes—a reference to forests cleared for fuel and grazing. In Europe and North America, deforestation occurred at a rapid pace centuries ago, but no cycle of forest loss has been as dramatic as that of the modern era. Much of the world's forest cover has been destroyed in the past two centuries—since 1990 the planet lost nearly half a million square miles of forest, an area twice the size of France. Michael Williams, an emeritus professor of geography at Oxford and the author of "Deforesting the Earth," refers to the period of deforestation following the Second World War as "the great onslaught."

A fifth of the world's wood comes from countries that have serious problems enforcing their timber laws, and most of those countries are also experiencing the fastest rates of deforestation. Until a decade ago, many governments were reluctant to acknowledge illegal logging, largely because it was made possible by the corruption of their own officials. As early as the nineteen-eighties, the Philippines had lost the vast majority of its primary forests and billions of dollars to illegal loggers. Papua New Guinea, during roughly the same period, experienced such catastrophic forest loss that it commissioned independent auditors to assess why it was happening; they determined that logging companies were "roaming the countryside with the self-assurance of robber barons; bribing politicians and leaders, creating social disharmony and ignoring laws in order to gain access to, rip out, and export the last remnants of the province's valuable timber." In 1998, the Brazilian government announced that most of the country's logging operations were being conducted beyond the ambit of the law.

E.I.A. began to focus on illegal logging after receiving a plea for help from scientists working in the jungles of Southeast Asia. In 1999, Biruté Mary Galdikas, a leading expert on orangutans and an acolyte of Louis Leakey, told Thornton that men with chain saws were cutting into protected Indonesian forests where she had been conducting her research. "It turned out that someone had just illegally redrawn the boundary of the park so that the local timber baron could have access to the trees," Thornton said. Indonesia is home to more endangered species than any other place in the world, and logging was conducted in a state of near total anarchy. By the late nineteen-nineties, the government estimated that as much as seventy per cent of the country's total timber harvest was illegal, and the World Bank calculated that Indonesia was losing three and a half billion dollars annually because of it. In a series of undercover investigations, E.I.A. and an Indonesian group called Telapak discovered that many loggers were targeting a tree called *ramin*, which had great strength, was easy to stain, and could be sliced into thin pieces. Ramin turned up in the West in countless cheap items: paintbrushes, two-dollar pool cues, dowels. Even after Indonesia banned the export of ramin, in 2001, the wood was still smuggled out of the country in large volumes.

Von Bismarck's first undercover job, he told me, was "following the ramin trail." By temperament and upbringing, he seemed well suited for clandestine operations. He once told me that his favorite book, which he had read in the fourth grade, was "All the King's Men." When I asked him why, he said, "In terms of how the world works, you have people interacting in a very sensible way, and in some cases it added up to corruption, and in some cases it added up to good things. The book presents a very complicated system, a muddled world, but also a very human world." Von Bismarck's family life was also complicated and muddled and very human, of course, and Gottfried, his father, told me that "as a result, I think, he has developed a great ability to integrate conflicting parties." Occasionally, I heard von Bismarck speak empathetically about the very people he was trying to catch—"poor guys doing really hard work, destroying the natural resources of their own area, and getting arrested."

In 2003, von Bismarck picked up the trail in Singapore, where he went undercover and met with a trafficker who boasted that profits from black-market ramin were "better than drug smuggling." In Malaysia, he met with associates of an underworld figure known as the Ramin King, who described how the wood was given false Malaysian paperwork to obscure its origins. In Taiwan, he secretly filmed a baby-crib manufacturer named Jim Lee, who made products that were sold at J. C. Penney, and who said that he was shipping thousands of cribs made with ramin to Wal-Mart, "even though it is smuggled." Von Bismarck presented this information to Taiwanese officials, who raided Lee's facilities and barred half of his stock from export. (Lee now maintains that his wood was legal.) Von Bismarck also contacted J. C. Penney and Wal-Mart—both took steps to remove items made of ramin from their stores—and notified American authorities, who put imports from Lee's factory on a watch list. A former customs officer told me, "He gave us the same kind of information that we would have expected from another agent. It was amazing to us that there was somebody out there who could keep track of that sort of thing." This year, some of von Bismarck's undercover footage—of a manufacturer in Shanghai who allegedly sold illicit ramin to American companies—helped bring about a U.S. federal indictment.

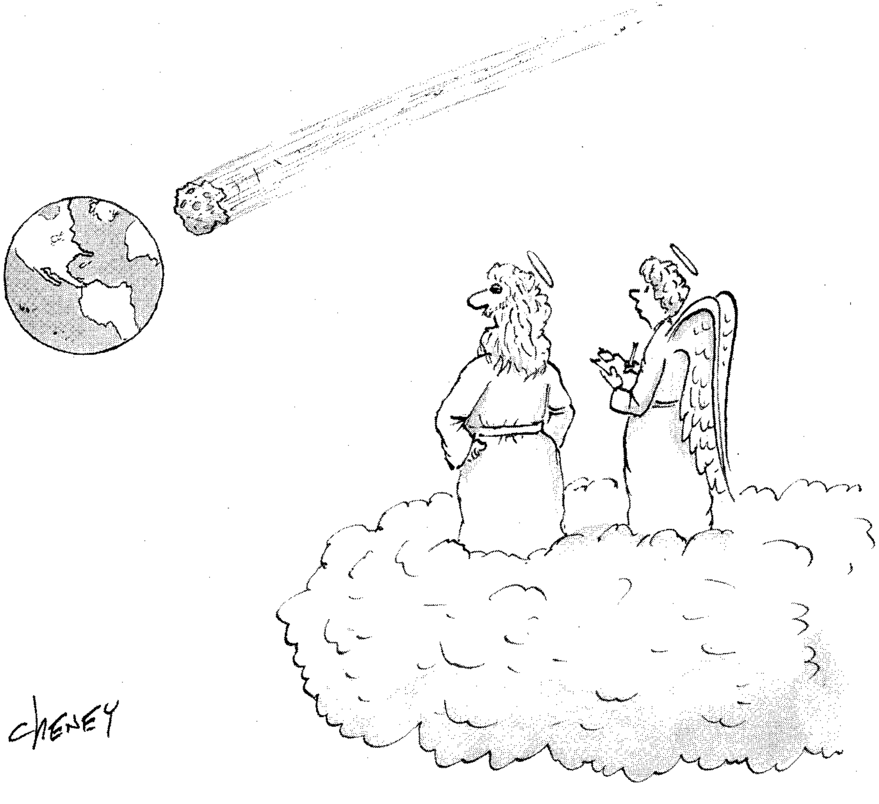
Lee had told von Bismarck that furniture manufacturers were leaving Taiwan in large numbers for mainland China, and after his workplace was raided he opened a factory there, too. While more and more manufacturers were moving to China, the forest-products industry there was dramatically changing. In 1998, the Yangtze River watershed flooded, killing more than three thousand people and causing more than thirty billion dollars in damage. At the time, some Communist Party officials believed that the flood was exacerbated by soil erosion—the result of "over quota" cutting of trees—and the government banned logging throughout much of the country. In order to meet its immense demand for raw materials, China began to buy unprecedented quantities of wood from abroad; it is now the largest importer of logs and also the largest exporter of finished wood products. China began to act the way many developed countries in North America and Europe do: it had destroyed much of its primary forests, gained from doing so, and was now protecting the trees it had left by buying wood indiscriminately, often from "high risk" countries, like Indonesia. The year of the flood, China started importing large volumes of wood from Russia, which has more forest than any country in the world and was in a state of political and economic anarchy. The greatest traffic in illicit wood is now thought to be from Russia to China.

All investigations must begin with a plan, and von Bismarck had begun devising his operation in Manchuria months earlier, from an office in a small brick house near Dupont Circle, in Washington, D.C. The workspace is crammed into three small rooms. There are maps on the walls, reports piled on shelves, and a computer workstation to edit undercover video footage. Eight E.I.A. campaigners, and sometimes a dog, spend most of their daytime hours there, and some late nights, too. Their annual budget is nine hundred thousand dollars, an improvement from the organization's earliest form of financing: credit cards. The most popular word in the office is probably "leverage," because E.I.A. tends to use its undercover information to pressure governments and companies to change their behavior.

Von Bismarck had not been to northern China before, nor was he very familiar with Russian timber, but he knew that he wanted to frame his investigation around an American retailer that was enmeshed in the trade, and that he could leverage. He chose Wal-Mart. A tenth of China's exports to the United States are sold by Wal-Mart; if the company were a sovereign nation, it would be China's eighth-largest trading partner. "We knew that American demand for wood was causing forest destruction," he told me. "If we could get the biggest company in the country to take note, then we thought we could make a difference." He intended to chart the wood's journey from the Russian forest to suburban store shelves through the complicated network of Wal-Mart's Chinese suppliers—whose identities the company takes care to obscure. When he was done, he planned to show the company what he had discovered or release his findings to the media.

The first step was a physical audit of every wood product that Wal-Mart sold, to try to determine its precise origin. This was done in two stores by a twenty-eight-year-old E.I.A. campaigner named David Groves. "I probably put in four eight-hour days in each store," Groves told me. "I would get there around ten in the morning and not leave until six. I ate what was in a Wal-Mart. I sustained myself on a laughable amount of cheeseburgers." Evidently, one can walk into a Wal-Mart, systematically turn boxes on end, and take notes without interference from employees. "I actually got a lot more customers asking me stuff than Wal-Mart staff," Groves told me. The size of the task became apparent early on. Groves began by including paper in his inventory, but soon became overwhelmed. "I was like, 'That is completely undoable,'" he said. He confined his audit to wood, and ultimately collected data on more than nine hundred products, which von Bismarck used as a blueprint for his trip. Groves also studied two cities in China's far north that serve as the main gateways for the trade in wood: Manzhouli, near Siberia; and Suifenhe.

In the nineteen-eighties, Suifenhe became a test city for what Party officials called "socialism with Chinese characteristics"—the gradual and controlled opening of Chinese markets. Russians would come to the city with furs or old military-issue goods and exchange them for Chinese-made products. The practice became known as *dao bao*, or "changing bags." Largely because of its proximity to Russia and its distance from the central government,

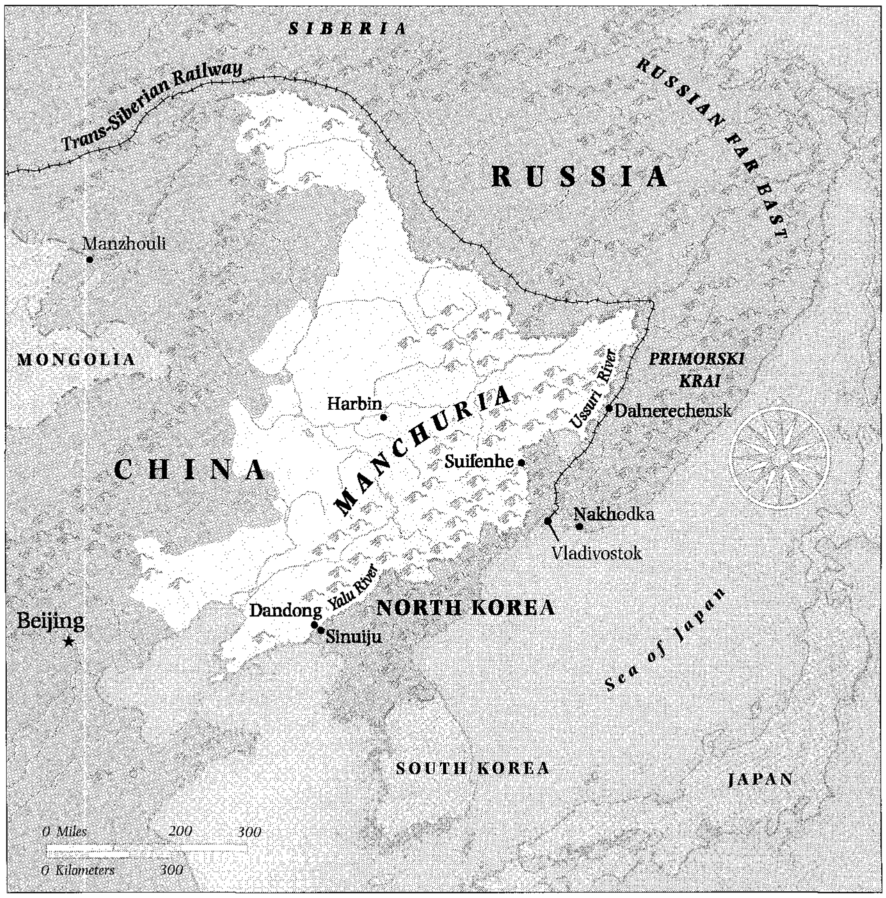


"I suppose they'll expect a bailout."

Suifenhe developed an energetic and violent shadow economy. Some Chinese “entrepreneurs” smuggled opium and ephedrine, which was widely available in China but forbidden in Russia. Local mobsters flourished, and reached out to their Russian counterparts. At times, they clashed. Marc Mooney, an American timber trader who recently tried to conduct business in Suifenhe, told me, “I’ve heard stories of Chinese men going on the other side of the border and just disappearing.” Occasionally, they were discovered: an entrepreneur who had travelled to Russia to buy trucks ended up floating off the coast of Vladivostok with bullet wounds in his head; two others were found fatally shot in a car that had been parked in a Russian forest.

The timber industry in Suifenhe is largely centered on “primary processing,” the most rudimentary type of production—cutting logs into sawn wood, for instance, which is then shipped to other cities in China for more refined manufacturing. Von Bismarck wanted to start at the base of the Wal-Mart chain—the suppliers to the suppliers—and the most logical target was the Shanglian Group. It belongs to Sun Laijun, who grew up in Harbin, the provincial capital, but began going to Suifenhe in 1991, in search of opportunity. “The first thing I did when I arrived in Suifenhe was to look for a Russian translator,” he recalled in an interview with CCTV. One of his first big barter deals involved swapping twenty railway cars of urea, a chemical used in fertilizers, for apples. In 1998, when China’s logging ban was enacted, he formed Suifenhe Longjiang Shanglian Import and Export Company, and became heavily involved in the timber trade. Longjiang Shanglian now imports one out of every ten logs that enter China from Russia.

The company has been the focus of a number of environmental investigations, and has grown suspicious of strangers. When von Bismarck and Wu, in their guise as representatives of Axion Trading, tried to arrange a meeting with Sun, a receptionist told them that he was in Russia and directed their inquiries to another executive, who asked right away if they belonged to an environmental group. “What groups?” Wu asked, and the executive said, “If you don’t know what that is, then you’re O.K.” A meeting was set up with Longjiang Shanglian’s manager, Sun Laijun’s brother Laiyong, the following afternoon. “To a certain extent, you have to consider security,” Wu later told me. “They own half of Suifenhe, probably, and, from what we know about the timber traders all around the world—some of them can be real nasty.”



Suifenhe’s proximity to Russia has insured it an energetic shadow economy.

JEFFREY WARD

“Let’s go,” von Bismarck told Wu, and they headed into Longjiang Shanglian’s headquarters, a gray building that towers over the city’s factories. Both men were wired with hidden video and audio equipment. After presenting themselves to a security guard, they went to the third-floor office of Sun Laiyong, who was surrounded by a coterie of senior managers. “The whole rail yard, stretching all the way to the mountainside, belongs to our family,” Sun Laiyong said. The men talked about the company’s operations in Russia, where it bought nearly all its wood. About forty minutes into the meeting, Wu attempted to steer the discussion toward illegality. He asked about problems that the company faced, and Sun Laiyong said, “There are transportation costs, customs fees, mafia protection money—”

“Mafia protection money?” Wu asked.

“Mafia protection money, and other miscellaneous costs. Russia is very—”

One of the managers interrupted. “Even the police is like the mafia,” he said.

Sun Laiyong continued, “Doing business in timber, you’ll have to pay protection money to them.”

“So when you go to Russia—”

“*We* don’t want to go there!” Sun Laiyong said. “We send others there instead.” He claimed that Chinese businesses were able to muscle out Japanese companies, which for decades have had a presence in the Russian Far East, because the business climate was “dark,” and often required payments made by the suitcase. “Small Japanese companies can’t buy any timber in Russia,” Sun Laiyong said. "They buy it here." He gestured to von Bismarck, and said, "He will not be able to buy any timber in Russia. We bring cash there and pay up front. Cash trade. Anything happens."

"Millions of dollars in cash?" Wu asked.

"Yes."

Wu asked what kinds of mafia groups Longjiang Shanglian dealt with. "All kinds," Sun Laiyong said. He described a contract murder he had heard about that took place in 2001, during a struggle to control Nakhodka, one of Russia's largest ports, on the Pacific. "The manager didn't want to sell it, and a few days later he was killed," he said. Sun Laiyong mentioned the mayor of Vladivostok, a crime boss known as Winnie the Pooh, who was convicted on corruption charges. "Vladivostok's mayor was caught," Sun Laiyong said. "But he was the head of the mafia."

After the meeting, von Bismarck and Wu got into a car and reviewed the encounter. They had obtained evidence that Longjiang Shanglian's operations were enmeshed with corruption in Russia, and that Sun Laiyong regarded bribery as a mundane expense, but they had failed to learn how it affected the company's supply. "When it came to the actual logging, he said, 'Oh, yes, we have all the proper documents. Otherwise, how can you log?' " Wu said. "So, as soon as he said that, he kind of shut the door on me."

Wu leaned back. "Ach, I'm disappointed," he said.

"Yeah?" von Bismarck said.

"I should think that I did really poorly."

"Don't say that," von Bismarck told him, and the two men sat in silence as the car rumbled across the uneven pavement, toward their hotel.

Sun Laiyong's references to organized crime pointed to one of the most disturbing aspects of the illegal timber trade: the violence that supports it. Last December, the body of a Russian banker with close ties to the timber industry was found at the bottom of his swimming pool, near Moscow. A bag had been pulled over his head, and his arms had been tied to his ankles. In a sloppy attempt at a coverup, a suicide note had been left at the scene, prompting a law-enforcement official to say, "He's not Harry Houdini." I heard of a similar "suicide" not far from Vladivostok earlier this year: an activist working with the World Wildlife Fund was found at a remote hunting cabin, fatally shot, an unconvincing note by his side. This type of violence can be found elsewhere. Earlier this year, in Peru, a community leader who tried to report a shipment of stolen timber was shot to death in a government office. Three years ago, in Brazil, a missionary and community organizer from Ohio, Sister Dorothy Stang, was murdered in the state of Pará, where a third of the Brazilian Amazon's deforestation is occurring and where she had made enemies of loggers.

In 2001, experts with the United Nations in the Democratic Republic of Congo coined a phrase, "conflict timber," to describe how logging had become interwoven with the fighting there. The term is apt for a number of other places. In Burma, stolen timber helps support the junta and the rebels. In Cambodia, it helped fund the Khmer Rouge, one of the most brutal rebel factions in history. Charles Taylor, the former President of Liberia, distributed logging concessions to warlords and a member of the Ukrainian mafia, and the Oriental Timber Company—known in Liberia as Only Taylor Chops—conducted arms deals on his behalf. The violence tied to Taylor's logging operations reached unprecedented levels, and in 2003 the U.N. Security Council imposed sanctions on all Liberian timber. (China, the largest importer of Liberian timber, tried to block the sanctions.) Shortly afterward, Taylor's regime collapsed. An American official told me that the U.S. intelligence community "absolutely put the fall of Taylor on the timber sanctions."

When von Bismarck discusses this type of violence, there is emotion in his voice. He once told me that he looked up to his grandfather Klaus, who had written in his memoirs of defying an order to execute captured Soviets during the war: it "contravened everything I had been taught and was incompatible with my conscience." When Hitler's regime collapsed, Klaus joined Allied programs designed to erase the Nazi legacy. Martín Escobari, von Bismarck's Harvard roommate, told me, "This is something that clearly had an impact on Sascha. He is very proud of his grandfather, who had been part of the reconstruction of Germany, making up for very evil stuff. Sascha's family comes from a long history of military service. I think he has also tried to make up for previous wrongs."

Not long ago, von Bismarck testified in Congress about timber smuggling and about activists who had been attacked in countries where he had gone undercover. "We're not talking about fuzzy technicalities," he told me. "We're talking about people getting killed, and poor people's livelihood stolen." Some of the people had worked with E.I.A., such as a reporter in Indonesia who had been attacked by thugs carrying machetes. At the hearing, he said, "We are the unwitting financiers of this crime."

Von Bismarck often argues that illegal logging is as much a problem of global demand as it is of supply—which isn't necessarily obvious. Today, the worldwide sales of forest products are worth about a trillion dollars annually, but more wood is used locally, for fuel, than is traded for industrial purposes; in Africa, nearly ninety per cent of all wood harvested is for energy. Moreover, many developed countries import raw timber from places that do not have substantial illegal-logging problems. But wood can be chopped, sliced, and pulverized in countless ways, by any number of middlemen, and large quantities of stolen timber end up in the West as finished products. The United States is the world's largest consumer of finished wood items. In a year, every American uses the equivalent of seventy-two cubic feet of wood. Despite advances in recycling and technology, the per-capita consumption of wood in the United States has risen since the mid-nineteen-sixties.

It is rising elsewhere, too. Wood consumption in China is about fifteen times lower than it is in the United States. For centuries, the Chinese have made paper from bamboo, rice straw, and other non-wood fibres, but the central government recently decided to push the country's papermaking industry away from those raw materials, because the quality was poor, and the process polluted too much water. The authorities closed down thousands of factories, and, between 1980 and 2002, the proportion of non-wood fibre used in

Chinese papermaking fell by half. Meanwhile, the over-all amount of paper consumed increased. If it ever grows to the level of American consumption, then China alone would end up using double the planet's current paper production—if that level of demand could ever be met. In India, too, the use of paper is expected to double by 2015. Improving standards of living, combined with population growth, have created a twofold pressure on forests: more people are demanding wood, and people are demanding more of it.

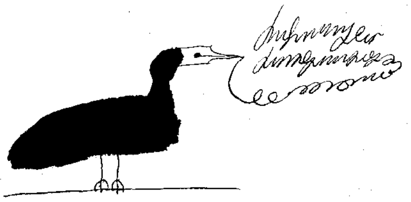
No one has attempted to calculate what it would cost to restrict all wood products to sustainable forests and plantations. Murray Gell-Mann, the Nobel Prize-winning physicist, once defined sustainability as "living on nature's income rather than its capital." As a planet, then, if we are consuming the world's forest capital—and deforestation suggests that we are—everything we use that is derived from wood is undervalued. Von Bismarck told me that an economy that structurally undervalues wood is bound to accept illegal timber without much resistance, because the excess black-market supply only reinforces the misconception that wood is cheap and the supply nearly inexhaustible. (According to one estimate, there is enough illicit timber traded worldwide to depress global prices for wood by as much as sixteen per cent.) The notion is reinforced by the murkiness of the timber economy. Very few companies take the trouble to discover where the wood in their products originates. To do so would be expensive, and consumers don't demand it of them. Indifference has become the norm.

From the docks and tall buildings of Dandong, one can see, across the Yalu River, a North Korean metropolis called Sinuiju, enveloped by smog. On the Chinese side of the border, Dandong is surrounded by hills covered in chestnut trees. The city is home to a firm called Dandong Maisafu, China's largest exporter of toilet seats. The company sends its entire stock to Wal-Mart. Many of its toilet seats are made from oak, and von Bismarck was trying to find out where the wood came from.

An unexpected discovery by David Groves brought von Bismarck and Wu to Dandong. Groves had been combing through an enormous customs database called PIERS, which, every day, gathers more than twenty-five thousand bills of lading from around the world. Looking into PIERS is a bit like looking into the Matrix: there are thousands upon thousands of rows of numbers—tracking codes, shipping codes, container I.D.s. Wal-Mart generally chooses to remove its shipments from the publicly available version of PIERS, but, by chance, the company left on the record forty thousand entries on wood imports from China—including Russian oak toilet seats from a company called Dandong Anmin. When von Bismarck and Wu visited Anmin, they were told that it was no longer dealing with Wal-Mart. (Later, they learned that Anmin was selling some of its products, through a middleman, on Amazon.com.) A senior manager at Anmin referred them to Dandong Maisafu, which was run by one of the owner's relatives.

As the investigation progressed, von Bismarck found that this type of reshuffle was common. "We had been given the gift of this data," he told me, referring to the PIERS information. "But then we found there was an added challenge: the turnover in Wal-Mart suppliers. It was the 'Wal-Mart phenomenon' that we were bumping into, the phenomenon of leveraging suppliers by dumping them at a high frequency." He and Wu would encounter factory owners who had just shipped Wal-Mart goods made with Russian wood but could or would no longer settle for Wal-Mart's price. "That made our investigation difficult, but it also made it difficult for Wal-Mart to get reliable wood," he said. "It created incentives for suppliers to get bad wood."

Von Bismarck and Wu called the offices of Dandong Maisafu, again posing as commodities traders, and met with Chunshou Zhuo, a garrulous, pot-bellied man in his late fifties, who wore a plaid shirt, jeans, and a trucker's cap. Zhuo said that he owned Maisafu with his daughter, and that they entered the toilet-seat business about eight years ago. His company made two million dollars a month, and exported furniture made from oak and other species to Wal-Mart. When Wu asked where the oak came from, Zhuo said that it was Chinese—"from here, in the mountains"—but Wu learned from a Maisafu floor manager that some of the toilet seats were made from Russian timber. Zhuo's daughter later confirmed that the company used Russian hardwood for about a fifth of its products.



That afternoon, von Bismarck and Wu visited Dalian Huafeng, one of the largest furniture manufacturers in China. From the PIERS data, von Bismarck learned that Huafeng manufactured cribs for an American company called Simplicity for Children, which was, in turn, a Wal-Mart supplier. Huafeng, it turned out, was buying wood from Longjiang Shanglian—the importer in Suifenhe that paid protection money in Russia. Slowly, the pieces of Wal-Mart's wood-supply chain began to come together.

Von Bismarck asked a Huafeng manager, "Big clients like Wal-Mart, they don't ask where the wood is from?"

"No, no, never," she said. "Never."

While there are international treaties designed to protect the oceans and the planet's biodiversity, and to address climate change and the ozone layer, there are no corresponding agreements on how best to manage the planet's trees. This has not been for lack of trying. In 1992, at the Rio Earth Summit, such a convention was proposed and debated, but the talks faltered on the question of who should bear the cost of keeping the planet's forests intact—the countries that consume so much of the world's wood or those who own it? No one could agree. It did not help that more than eighty per cent of the world's forests are under state control, and that governments tend to regard them as sovereign resources.

The only treaty that governs the global trade in forest products is the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species—what one American official described to me as a kind of "emergency room" for rare plant and animal species at the threshold of extinction. When von Bismarck was investi-

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gating ramin, which is protected by the convention, law-enforcement agents could, in theory, confiscate shipments of goods made from the wood if they did not have the proper permits. (No commercially traded Russian timber has this level of protection.) In practice, the system does not always work very well. Von Bismarck once tipped off the authorities about undocumented ramin headed to a crib company called Baby Trilogy, in Lubbock, Texas. The owners, friends of the Bush family, enlisted the office of Senator John Cornyn, of Texas, to help get the shipment released, and it was. (They say that they did not understand the law, and that this was their last shipment of ramin.) Several years ago, a study found that large volumes of mahogany—the only other commercially significant tree protected by the convention—were entering the United States without permits.

During the past several years, von Bismarck and his colleagues have been campaigning for a new way to control timber imports: an amendment to a curious law called the Lacey Act, which, for more than a century, has been a cornerstone of nature protection in America. John F. Lacey, a Civil War veteran and congressman, introduced the legislation in 1900, banning the interstate trade of illegally hunted game. Over time, the Lacey Act was expanded to cover the international trade of wildlife.

John Lacey was a passionate advocate for forests, but, for reasons that are unclear, the law that bears his name fell short of protecting plants the way it did animals. Von Bismarck told me that in 2005 he began "bouncing from Hill office to Hill office, looking for a champion to move forward an amendment" that would expand the act. A congressional aide told him that he would have to get the support of timber-industry associations, but to do that he had to overcome decades of antagonism. "To say there was animosity is an understatement," the aide told me. A member of the Hardwood Federation, which is made up mostly of family-owned businesses, said, "The industry is, really, full of very conservative, rural, property-rights-oriented Republicans, who have been deeply suspicious that the environmentalist community's only interest was to put them out of business." Illegal logging is not only a foreign phenomenon: in the nineteen-nineties, it was estimated that a hundred million dollars' worth of trees were stolen from public lands every year. Von Bismarck was asking the timber industry to lobby for tougher regulation of its own business.

As it happened, a number of American companies believed that they were being hurt by illegal wood—"especially coming out of China, the numbers made no sense to us," said Harry Demorest, who was then a board member of the Hardwood Federation and the C.E.O. of Columbia Forest Products. "We knew what the market price was for logs, and the products were being sold at less than cost." Another industry group, the American Forest and Paper Association, estimated that the trade in stolen wood was costing the domestic forest-products industry a billion dollars annually. Both groups—along with some large retailers—eventually agreed to support the amendment. (The Bush Administration declined to do so.) It was sponsored in the Senate and in the House by two Democratic legislators from Oregon, Senator Ron Wyden and Representative Earl Blumenauer, but much of the bill's fine-tuning occurred in conferences off the Hill.

Following months of negotiation, an amendment took shape: it would prohibit taking any plant or plant product out of any country in violation of its natural-resource laws. There would be no "innocent owner" defense, which meant that importers who claimed not to know they had bought illegal wood, or items made from it, would still be subject to penalties. This provision generated strong opposition from some industry groups, but it was central to the bill's design. "The idea is that you want to stop illegal plants from being in the market, the same way you don't want illegal art in the market—it can be seized wherever it is found," von Bismarck told me. But the bill's greatest strength was also its greatest weakness: while it used the American legal system to reinforce the laws of other countries, forestry codes in some countries are so vague and contradictory that they are hard to follow, even for loggers with good intentions, and even more difficult for American judges to interpret. When I asked von Bismarck about this, he told me, "We want to get to a point where the rules matter, then we want to fight to have them be the right rules."

Just before the amendment was up for a vote in the House, lobbyists from Monsanto and a trade group called the Biotechnology Industry Organization, or BIO, suddenly expressed their unease about it. "It was late in the game," von Bismarck told me. "Everybody was saying, 'Oh, my God, they're going to kill this thing.' " It turned out that BIO and Monsanto had only one major request: to be exempted from the law. At a meeting convened in the Capitol to discuss their concerns, Jen Daulby, Monsanto's representative, argued that the amendment would prevent companies from using genetic samples it acquired overseas. She said that foreign laws could be unreasonable. A timber lobbyist who was there recalled, "It looked pretty bad. We all thought the same thing: Did they just say that they wanted to take plants out regardless of whether the particular country wants them to?"

Daulby told me she was concerned that Monsanto "would be violating the Lacey Act" if the amendment covered all plants and plant products, and that the bill would "prohibit the research materials that were coming back." She said these things on a conference call with two other Monsanto officials listening in, and only a bit later, after a reminder from the company's press officer, did she add, "As Brad mentioned, we are following other countries' laws, but having a bill in the United States that endorses those is a totally different thing."

Ultimately, the biotech industry obtained its exemption. Von Bismarck told me, "They are arguably stealing the intellectual property of poor countries, and there exists the whole debate about that, which is an interesting debate, because they will try to claim the high ground and say, 'We all happily benefit from some of those medicines.' " But the bill's supporters did not want to risk getting the amendment killed over an exemption that, as Monsanto pointed out, was unrelated to the timber trade. Still, von Bismarck said, when the biotech lobbyists joined in, "it was a big, eyeopening moment in terms of how government works."

Von Bismarck decided to publish the results of the Wal-Mart investigation in December, in a report that drew upon eight undercover meetings in China and upon Groves's research. It stated that two hundred thousand cribs made from high-risk Russian poplar and birch were being sold to Wal-Mart by Simplicity for Children, and noted that "at least thirty-one thousand trees reach Wal-Mart each year in the form of solid wood toilet seats made in Dandong." Von Bismarck compared Wal-Mart's fastidiousness about pricing with "the company's inattention to the legality of its raw materials," and noted that "Wal-Mart's customers currently risk financing criminal timber syndicates."

Simplicity for Children denied using illegal Russian wood. Wal-Mart's response was surprisingly less confrontational. The company told von Bismarck that it had already been examining its supply chain, and had just created a new position—senior manager for strategic sourcing—to oversee its forest products. During a conference call with several E.I.A. campaigners, Tom Flynn, who had been assigned to the position, said that his job had been created in part because of the report.

Flynn is a soft-spoken man with a disarming nature. "I've been with Wal-Mart for just about four years," he told me. "My background—and you'll find this a little peculiar—is in the apparel industry, denim sourcing. When I was first approached about this job, I said, 'You know, I don't have a Ph.D. in forestry,' and they told me, 'Well, that's not what we are looking for.'" He added, "Fifteen or twenty years ago, people were never checking their factories in the apparel world. You go back to the days of articles about children being chained to machines, and the industry basically said, 'This is not acceptable.' " Flynn said that he had begun pretty much the way David Groves had, by grabbing a legal pad and walking through a nearby Wal-Mart. "I got to the fourth page, and I gave up," he said. Instead, he worked with what he called a "risk assessment" team to build a database of every wood-based product in Wal-Mart's inventory, and identify the ones he should worry about. Flynn was explaining this by speakerphone, with a Wal-Mart press officer listening in; she, too, conceded that the company had "a learning curve in all of this."

In July, Wal-Mart signed an agreement with the World Wildlife Fund to eliminate illegal wood from its furniture within six years, and to work together on Flynn's risk assessment. "It is a very important signal, but it will only be as important as its follow-through," von Bismarck said. The company had good reason to act quickly. Its announcement followed the passage into law of the Lacey Act amendment, and similar legislation had already been introduced in

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the British Parliament and was being considered by the European Union. Wal-Mart began advising its suppliers to meet with attorneys about the new law.

Earlier this year, von Bismarck travelled to the Russian Far East to document the timber theft at its source. He flew to Vladivostok and met with Denis Smirnov, the forestry director of the World Wildlife Fund's branch office in the Russian Far East. Smirnov is thirty-eight, and has been living in Vladivostok since 2002, but he was born in Leningrad, and at times demonstrates the haughtiness of an urbanite in one of Russia's most remote provinces. ("In my nightmares, I did not imagine that I would spend my life on illegal logging," he said.) The two men planned to drive through the winter night, to see if they could catch gangs of illegal loggers deep in the taiga the following morning. In daylight, they feared, scouts might see them.

By seven in the evening, the sky had turned dark, and von Bismarck and Smirnov were heading north on the M-60, a two-lane highway running along the Ussuri River, which divides the Russian frontier from northern China. For long stretches, the road was paved, but in places it was completely caked over with snow. Elsewhere, the pavement had crumbled away entirely, leaving behind raw, frozen earth. A few Chinese-made tractor-trailers heading north left clouds of white powdery snow in their wake.

Smirnov drove. He had picked up a special officer from a regional police unit devoted to fighting "economic crimes." The officer, a taciturn man in his early twenties, who wanted to be known only as Vladimir, sat in the passenger seat. He was dressed in camouflage, but over his uniform he wore a puffy black jacket. "He is not yet corrupt," Smirnov said. "It's not ordinary for a policeman." Small, impoverished villages drifted by in the darkness. In the taiga many homes used wood stoves for heating and for cooking. Smirnov drove past timber depots with enormous stockpiles of logs headed for China, but soon they, too, disappeared.

Not far from a logging town called Dalnerechensk—an area where Longjiang Shanglian acquires some of its timber—Smirnov described how loggers had once sabotaged his car. "For me, it is painful to see this wilderness disappear—and it is useless, actually, because nobody is profiting from the disappearance," he said. "It could be justified if our country, our people, would get some real profit from this harvesting. I think the head of these gangs, they are only thinking about their pockets. They are not thinking about the future, and the people who are living here. These guys can move to—I don't know where, Hawaii or the Bahamas. But other people have no such opportunities."

Sometime after midnight, he drove into a labyrinth of narrow forest trails. Wherever a trail forked, loggers had hung bottles or boxes on branches as markers. Roughly half of the trails crossed frozen bogs, impassable in spring and summer. The car finally stopped in a clearing, and Smirnov, von Bismarck, and Vladimir spent the rest of the night there. For a time, they kept the engine running, but eventually turned it off. Frost formed on the insides of the windows. In the morning, Smirnov drove down snow-covered trails, and soon found one with fresh treads. It led to a pile of cut linden in the snow, and von Bismarck filmed the scene. There were shavings near the logs. He listened for the sound of chain saws, but the forest was quiet.

The search continued fruitlessly until midafternoon, when someone saw a flash of color behind a row of trees. In the distance, several men were standing near a pile of logs that was worth several thousand dollars. Vladimir and von Bismarck made their way through the woods to them. It is difficult to describe the sense of uncertainty that precedes a confrontation among strangers who are so far removed from civilization. At the turn of the last century, an imperial Russian geographer wrote, "In the Ussurian taiga, one must expect at times to meet with a wild beast, but the most dangerous meeting of all is with a man." As Vladimir drew near, he removed a handgun from a holster and transferred it to his jacket pocket. Von Bismarck saw this. "I was still worried about them being armed," he told me later. "I did have some kind of sense that Vladimir knew what he was doing, but he was very young."

Vladimir approached the men, but, as they spoke, another logger about fifty feet away powered up a chain saw and cut into a tree. It must have been the final cut, because the tree came crashing into a blanket of snow. "So a tree fell down, and, for me, when you hear a tree falling it is like the Holy Grail," von Bismarck said. "Because when we are trying to catch these guys, I mean, just the visual of an illegal logger in action, actually cutting down a tree—we have really only gotten it once, in Indonesia, and we have used that image a lot." The logger was dressed in an outfit made from thick pieces of beige felt or wool. With one foot, he stabilized the felled tree, and with a bright-orange chain saw he began to sever it into logs. Vladimir approached him. "The logger looked up and his face went numb, and then you could see him making a kind of fight-or-flight decision," von Bismarck recalled. For an instant, nothing happened, and then the logger began to run. Vladimir yelled, in Russian, "Where are you going?"

The man kept running, and Vladimir raised his gun over his head and fired a shot, but the man did not slow down. Vladimir was now running, too, through the snow, which was knee deep in places, and von Bismarck, with his camera, was not far behind, attempting to photograph the arrest. The chase seemed to move in slow motion. In winter, when the vegetation is brittle and devoid of leaves, there are not many places to hide in a forest. Still, the logger, middle-aged and visibly out of shape, ran with startling alacrity. In one hand, he was carrying his chain saw. Twigs snapped against his body. "Where are you going?" Vladimir yelled again as he drew nearer, and for a moment the uncertainty of real violence hung in the air. Von Bismarck plunged into the snow after the men; the cold air pinched his lungs as he ran—he later said that he felt as if his chest had been submerged in ice water. "I was eager to stay right with Vladimir, right over his shoulder, to get the shot," he said. The logger continued running, so Vladimir fired his gun into the air again, and an instant later he grabbed the logger by the arm, and the chase came to an abrupt end. ♦

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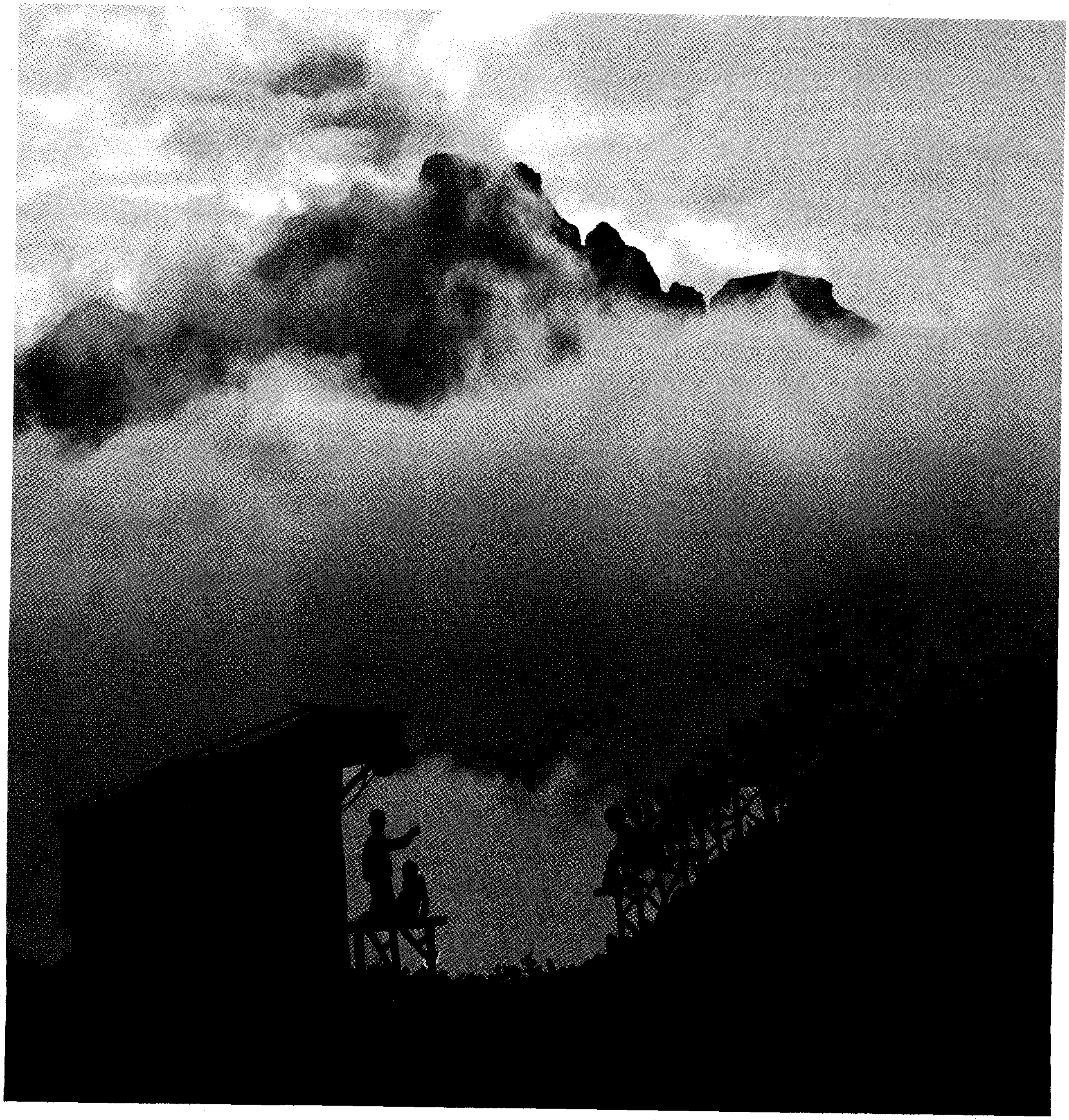
A video about illegal logging, plus an audio interview with Raffi Khatchadourian.

FICTION

THE IDIOT PRESIDENT

BY DANIEL ALARCÓN



When I was first out of the Conservatory, I did a two-month stint with a theatre group called Diciembre. It was an established company that had formed during the anxious years of the war, when it was known for its brazen trips into the conflict zone, bringing theatre to the people, and, in the city, for staging all-night marathon shows—pop reworkings of García Lorca, stentorian readings of Brazilian soap-opera scripts, always with a political edge, sometimes subtle, often not at all, anything to keep people awake and laughing through what would otherwise have been the dark, lonely hours of curfew. These shows were legendary among the theatre students of my generation, and many of my classmates claimed to have been present, as children, at one or another of these performances. They said that their parents had taken them, that they had witnessed an unholy union of recital and insurrection, of sex and barbarism, and that they remained, however many years later, unsettled and even inspired by the memory. They were all liars. We were, in fact, studying to be liars. It's been nine years since I graduated, and I imagine that these days students at the Conservatory talk about other things. They are too young to remember how ordinary fear was during the war. Perhaps they find it difficult to imagine a time when theatre was improvised in response to terrifying headlines, a time when delivering a line of dialogue with a chilling sense of dread did not even require acting. But, then, such are the narcotic effects of peace, and certainly no one wants to go backward.

More than a decade after the war, Diciembre still functioned as a loose grouping of actors and actresses who occasionally put on a show, often in a private home, to which the audience came by invitation only. Paradoxically, now that travel outside the city was relatively safe, they hardly ever went to the interior, so when a new tour was announced I auditioned eagerly. It was a rare opportunity, and, to my surprise, I got the part. Only three of us went—me, a curly-haired actor named Henry, and a short, dark-skinned man who introduced himself as Patalarga and never bothered to give me his real name. They were related, sort of—Henry had, at some point in the distant past, married and then divorced Patalarga's second cousin, a woman named Tania, to whom they alluded with the sort of hushed respect that tenant farmers might use when speaking of the weather. The two men had been friends for a long time, as long as I'd been alive, and I was pleased to be accepted into their company. I figured it would be a chance to learn from veterans.

Henry wrote most of the plays, and for that tour we were doing a subtle piece of invective he called "The Idiot President." Though its politics were easy to trace, it was very funny, involving a delicate interaction between an arrogant, self-involved head of state and his servant. Each day, the President's servant was replaced, the idea being that eventually every citizen of the country would have the honor of attending to the needs of the leader. These included helping him dress, combing his hair, reading his mail, etc. The President was fastidious and required that everything follow a rather idiosyncratic protocol, so the better part of each day was spent teaching the new servant how things should be done. Hilarity ensued. I played the idiot President's idiot son, Alejo, a role perfectly suited to my youthful skills, and over the course of our rehearsals I came to love this buffoonish adolescent in a way that I hadn't expected. He was a boastful lout and a petty thief, who was a great source of pride to his father, despite his many shortcomings. The climactic scene involved a heart-to-heart between the servant of the day and my character, after the President has gone to sleep, in which Alejo lets his guard down and admits that he has often thought of killing his father but is too frightened to go through with it. The servant is intrigued—after all, he lives in a ruined country, subject to the President's disastrous whims, and furthermore has spent the entire day being humiliated by him. The servant probes Alejo's doubts, and he opens up, voicing his concerns about freedom, about the rule of law, about the suffering of the people, until the servant finally allows that, yes, perhaps killing the President wouldn't be such a bad idea. For the sake of the country, you understand. Alejo pretends to mull it over, and then kills the startled servant himself, as punishment for treason. He picks the corpse clean, pocketing the man's wallet, his watch, and his rings, and the play ends with him shouting toward the room where the President is sleeping, "Another one, Father! We'll need another one tomorrow!"

Patalarga, Henry, and I left the capital in early March, the day after I turned twenty-one. It was summer on the coast, hot and humid, and we rode a bus up into the rainy mountains to the region where Patalarga was born, a part of the country I'd never seen before. Even at the time, I felt certain that I would never see it again. Everything about my life then—every decision I made or failed to make—was predicated on the idea that I'd be leaving the country soon. I expected to join my brother in California before the year was up: my visa was being processed, and it was only a matter of time. This was a very pleasant way to live, actually. It gave me a kind of private strength that allowed me to withstand certain indignities, confident that everything was temporary. We performed in small towns and villages, up and down a wide and gloomy valley, subject to heavy, freezing downpours that were like nothing I'd ever experienced. The skies swirled with blue-black clouds, and when it wasn't raining the winds blew straight through you. We were greeted warmly in each town, with a certain ceremony and solicitousness that I found charming, and every night the audience gave us a standing ovation that made all our efforts seem worthwhile. Sometimes the villages were just a handful of houses dotting endless yellowish gray fields. Our audience might be a dozen people altogether, a few farmers with ruddy faces, their long-suffering wives and undernourished children, who'd approach Henry after the play, never looking directly at him, and say respectfully, "Thank you, Mr. President."

The cold nearly destroyed me. In two weeks I lost three kilos, and one night, after a particularly energetic performance, I nearly fainted. When I recovered, we were invited to a party at a one-room adobe house on the outskirts of town. Henry and Patalarga were both on edge, drinking more than usual, because this was the town where Tania lived; apparently she'd been at the show, and might reappear at any moment. I was too ill to worry about that: taking a breath was like swallowing sharp knives, and my head felt

ILLUSTRATION: ZOHAR LAZAR; PHOTOGRAPH: THOMAS LAUPSTAD

as if it might separate from my neck and just float away into the threatening Andean sky. But everyone was exceedingly kind, paying special attention to feeding me and getting me drunk. The liquor helped, and it felt nice to be doted upon. When I started turning blue, the owner of the home, a squat gray-haired man named Cayetano, asked if I wanted a jacket. I nodded enthusiastically, and he rose and walked to the refrigerator, standing before its open door, as if contemplating a snack. I thought, He's making fun of me, and I heard Henry and Patalarga snickering. But then Cayetano opened the vegetable drawer and took out a pair of wool socks. He tossed them to me, and when he opened the door a little farther I saw that the refrigerator was, in fact, being used as a wardrobe. There were mittens in the butter tray, sweaters and jackets hanging from a wooden bar nailed to the inside walls. Only then did I notice the few perishables sitting on the counter. In this cold, of course, they were in no danger of spoiling.

The gathered men and women told sad stories about the war and laughed at their own suffering in ways that I found incomprehensible. Sometimes they would speak in Quechua, and then the laughter became much more intense, and also much sadder—or, at least, that's how it seemed to me. When Tania arrived, everyone stood. She had long black hair, which she wore in a single braid, and an orange-and-yellow shawl draped over her shoulders. Older than me but a little younger than my colleagues, Tania was petite, and yet somehow she gave the impression of great strength. She circled the room, shaking hands with everyone—except Henry, who instead received a floating kiss in the air just beside his right ear.

"Are you still acting," she asked when she got to me, "or are you actually that sick?"

I didn't know what to say, so when someone shouted, "He's drunk!," I was relieved. The room roared, and then everyone sat.

The drinking began in earnest now, and soon a guitar appeared from a corner of the room. It was passed from person to person, making a few laps around the circle before finally Tania kept it. Everyone cheered. She strummed a few chords, then cleared her throat, welcoming the visitors, thanking us all for listening. She sang in Quechua, picking out a complex accompaniment, her agile fingers unrestrained by the cold. I turned to Henry and asked him in a low voice what the song was about.

"About love," he whispered, without taking his eyes off her.

As the night wore on, I found myself appreciating Tania's beauty with greater and greater clarity. Henry and Patalarga watched me watching her, alternately glaring and smiling, in a sequence that was impossible to interpret. Much later, when I was finally succumbing to the cold and the liquor, Tania offered to lead me back to the hostel where I was staying. This was noted with feigned alarm, but she ignored it all. The town was small, there was no possibility of getting lost, and we trudged drunkenly through its streets, both of us wrapped in Cayetano's blanket. "You sing beautifully," I said. "What was it about?"

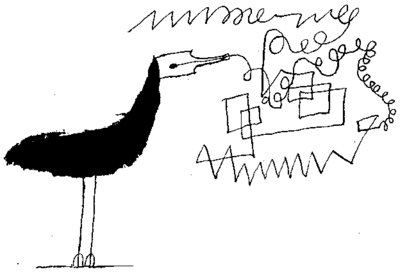
"Just old songs."

"Henry said you were singing about love."

She had a lovely laugh: clear and unpretentious, like moonlight. "He doesn't speak Quechua," Tania said. "Must have been a lucky guess."

We paused at the door of the hostel. I moved to kiss her, but she just patted me on the head as if I were a little boy. "Drink lots of water," she said, "and get as much rest as you can." And then she walked back to the party.

Inside the hostel, the owner gave me a large rubber bladder, swollen with boiling water, and as I prepared for bed I held it in my hands the way one might hold a beating human heart—my own heart, perhaps. I tried to go over my day—what had happened, or what, to my chagrin, had not. But the cold made coherent thought impossible, so I lay down with the bladder pressed against my belly, curling myself around it like a snail. I wondered whether I should have stayed in the city and what my friends were doing at that exact moment. They'd been jealous of me and my tour with Diciembre, and I struggled to remember that. Patalarga and Henry had done this circuit before, were constantly running into old friends. They seemed unfazed by the conditions that were slowly wearing me down. They had lived in the city for decades but did not consider it home.



And it was like this for weeks. In the mornings, weather permitting, we rode to the next town on a rickety bus, or on the bed of a truck piled with potatoes. I'd learned to chew coca leaves by then, had come to enjoy the numbness as it spread over my face, down my neck, and into my chest. The roads were barely wide enough for a horse cart, and often I looked over the face of a crumbling mountain, forcing myself to think of something other than death. Patalarga and Henry recovered from the previous evening with their eyes closed, suspended in deep and peaceful dreams. They were enjoying themselves; me, I was trying to stay alive.

Toward the end of the tour, we arrived at a town called San Germán, which was the remote outpost of an American mining company. The town consisted of a couple of hundred houses that seemed to have been airlifted to the wind-battered top of a desolate mountain, which was surrounded on three sides by even higher, more foreboding peaks. I think it was a silver mine, but it could have been copper or bauxite or something else, and, in a sense, it doesn't matter: all mining towns are the same. They are pitiless and isolated, often situated in places that might be beautiful were they not so extreme, and defined by a kind of human deprivation particular to the industry. In San Germán, thick clouds hung just above us, and I could smell metal in the air. I had never felt so far away from the world. We were more than four thousand metres above sea level, and the altitude rendered me useless. I spent the first day in the hostel, gripping the sides of the bed as if I were riding a roller coaster. San Germán was a small place, and there was very little to see, but Patalarga and Henry sat by my bedside, regaling me with the invented wonders of the town.

"You must get up," Patalarga said. "You have to see this place."

"There's a replica of the pyramids," Henry told me, "and it shines golden in the sunlight."

"On the plus side, my Lehman Brothers 5K-race T-shirt just sold for four dollars and twenty-six cents on eBay."

• •

I opened my eyes and saw his breath gathering in a cloud.

"A miniature Arc de Triomphe," Patalarga said.

"Cafés, tree-lined boulevards, and the night life—you won't believe it! Discos like in Batista's Havana, like Beirut before the war."

I paid them no attention. The room—indeed, my brain—filled with the concussive sound of their voices. I begged to be left alone, and then they disappeared. I closed my eyes again, and for a few hours I didn't move. I just listened desperately to the sound of my own breathing.

When my colleagues returned, they were sullen and angry. I could smell the mud that clung to their boots.

"You tell him."

"No, you tell him."

From my sickbed, I could hear them pacing. "Someone fucking tell me," I said. I had intended to shout, but I was weak, and it came out as the raspy plea of a heart patient. I kept my eyes closed. Someone sat on my bed. It was Henry. Bad news. Our first performance was scheduled for the next night, but there was a glitch. There was no electricity, no light. This was not a temporary condition, as we had been told when we checked into the hostel. The only power still running in town went to the homes of the American engineers, on the other side of the mine. "You should see how they live," Henry said, and described how, behind a high fence, they had created a facsimile of American life. Comfortable suburban homes, neatly paved streets, a baseball diamond.

I sat shivering beneath a half-dozen blankets. It sounded nice.

"Don't you have a brother in the U.S.?" Patalarga asked.

"Sure."

"Does he play baseball?"

"How should I know?"

I could barely get the words out. I knew nothing about baseball. In fact, I knew virtually nothing about my brother. He'd left home when he turned eighteen, several years before, and I thought of him only in terms of the visa he was supposed to get for me. It was too cold to waste energy scavenging through childhood memories.

Henry was upset. He spoke quickly, and I could hear the bitterness in his voice. We'd been promised a place to perform for the workers. The workers, the workers—these gallant, dignified men who were our entire reason for existing. We were supposed to do two shows, one for each shift. Our afternoon performance would be unaffected, but the miners on the day shift wouldn't be able to come. If we did a show at night, it would be in the dark—or only for the engineers. The fucking engineers. Henry was getting upset now, as he described men who spent their days nursing Daiquiris, pausing only to take turns whipping the noble miners.

It sounded positively feudal. "Are they really that bad?" I asked.

"Never mind him," Patalarga said. "His father was an engineer."

"Fuck you," Henry said, scowling.

"Henry here was a star on the company baseball team."

"Really?"

"Till he started stealing dynamite to give to the rebels."

"You're lying."

Neither would answer me.

A moment later, Henry was complaining again; this time, he tapped his finger on my forehead as he spoke. It felt like a mallet striking the skin of a bass drum, a strange way of showing affection, and I kept my eyes closed through the operation.

"We've come to this town for nothing. They've made fools of us, and Nelson here is going to die for no reason at all."

They were talking to each other now.

"We've sacrificed a young life—the best this country has to offer!—and we'll have nothing to show for it. Oh, the tragedy of it all! How he has suffered for his art! But what will we tell his mother?"

"You're both very funny," I said. "Seriously."

That night, they dragged me out into the dark streets of San Germán, all but carrying me. My head and body ached, and the earth beneath me

ROMANESQUE

Morning: smells of serious cooking float in the street.
Onions give up the ghost, flesh sizzles, a metal spoon
clinks on a dish. We've lived here for eight hundred years,
we're still hungry. Ancient mosses nibble the stones.
We found such fierce ways to love.
A demon for each, carved in limestone, squirms in the church:
Despair, Luxury—they tangle in vines, ride lions, gape.
Adepts at pronging pitchforks into the gut.
You saw light leak from my eyes. I saw you turn.
On the tympanum, Christ barely balances
in his almond chafing dish, Pentecostal fire
hurls out to the Apostles left and right,
they're microwaved. They were about to eat.
In the market, I bought lettuces as frilled,
scalloped, unfurled, and rainbow-hued
as rococo chapels—Batavia, Tarantelle,
Reine des Glaces—and the sun touched each sweet leaf
till it trembled and spoke in tongues.

—*Rosanna Warren*

seemed unsteady. I walked with one arm slung over Patalarga's shoulder, as Henry pointed out the dim yellow lights on the far slope of the hill: those were the engineers' homes. Behind them, a treacherous mountain peak disappeared into the clouds. I looked at that miserable little settlement and found it hard to feel much antipathy toward the Americans. Nature could have crushed them, and all of us, in an instant.

"Do you see them?" Henry asked. "Can you believe it?"

"No," I said. "I can't believe it."

I would rather have been poor anywhere else in the world than rich here.

We pushed on through the muddy streets. For the play, Henry wore long white gloves, but because of the bitter cold he had taken to wearing them even between performances. They were thin, sateen, probably not very warm, but they looked delicious. Now I noticed Patalarga eying them jealously.

"Give me those," he said finally, pointing at the gloves.

Henry held his hands up, wiggling his white, glowing fingers. "These?"

"Those."

"I'm the President," Henry said. "I wear the gloves."

Patalarga considered this for a moment. He turned to me. "I found him in an alley behind the cathedral, huffing glue and talking about how mean his daddy was."

I didn't say anything, nor did I let go of Patalarga. Without him, I would've fallen.

Henry didn't appear to be listening.

"All that change we wanted," Patalarga said. "And still the dark-skinned one plays the servant. And still the dark-skinned one dies in the end. Isn't that something?"

Henry shrugged. "It's because you're so good at it," he said.

We made it to San Germán's only restaurant, and by the light of a kerosene lamp ate food warmed by a kerosene stove, so that everything smelled and tasted of fuel. We were in a sour, helpless mood. Henry and Patalarga weren't talking, and it took all my strength just to keep from slipping off my chair and onto the cold cement floor. Still, after a meal and some tea, I had recovered a bit. We were nearly finished when some old miners walked in, carrying their helmets. Even in the dark, Patalarga recognized them from his days as an organizer. They joined our table and spoke in hushed tones about the conditions underground, which had improved somewhat since Henry and Patalarga's last visit. Better ventilation, better safety. Ten-hour shifts, down from fourteen.

"But no electricity."

The miners shrugged. They had hard, weathered faces. "It's coming, and, anyway, the mine is well lit," one of them said. His name was Ventosilla. It was written on his helmet, which he placed on the table. He flicked a switch and the headlamp came on, casting a vivid patch of light on the wall of the restaurant. Ventosilla turned it off and on a few times, and we all stopped to admire it.

He tapped the headlamp with his fingernail. "Halogen."

"And you all have those?" Patalarga asked.

The miner nodded.

My colleagues grinned.

The next night, we performed "The Idiot President" in a large tent made of blankets, by the combined lamplight of fifty miners. There were children and wives in attendance as well, and even a few American engineers who deigned to join the fun. I was feeling better, though not yet myself, whatever that means. I hadn't felt like myself since we'd left the city, since the bus had begun climbing into the clouds, but the sight of this makeshift theatre, abuzz with expectation, the halogen lights flitting every which way, made me hopeful. Backstage was actually just outside the tent, where the three of us stood, freezing and jittery, unusually excited, peeking in occasionally to see the crowd as it gathered.

When the tent was full, we slipped inside, to the relative warmth of the stage. The view was breathtaking: the crowd sitting on a rickety set of bleachers, a bright field of stars gleaming in the heavens. I turned to Henry and Patalarga, and saw that they were lost in it, too. This was the sky we had barely seen, the sky that had been hidden behind thick black rain clouds for the previous six weeks. We were introduced by the local union rep, and this night, like every night, the crowd cheered when they heard the name Diciembre, the lights bobbing up and down, as the miners nodded with satisfaction.

I ceded the stage to my colleagues,

and sat just off to the side. They began. With hunched shoulders and a face wracked with worry, Henry imbued his idiot President with a certain deranged gravitas, like Nixon in his last days, or Allende contemplating the tanks surrounding La Moneda. He paced the stage barking nonsensical instructions at his flummoxed servant—and no one has ever owned "flummoxed" as expertly as Patalarga did that night. I knew the whole play by heart, so mostly I concentrated on the miners' headlamps, which together formed a limpid pool of white onstage, shifting ever so slightly as the dialogue Ping-Ponged from one speaker to the other. When I stood, just before my cue to come on, the lights shifted stage right, so much so that Patalarga, standing opposite me, disappeared briefly in the sudden darkness.

Even in the dim light, I could see him smiling.

Toward the end of the play, we hit a rough patch. We could tell instantly. Henry delivered a line that usually got a laugh, but now it fell flat. We were losing the audience—the lights moved up and down, or side to side, wandering, and in an instant we were performing at dusk, when just a moment prior it had been morning. Never before or since has it been so easy for me to read a crowd, to get feedback so transparent and immediate. The failing light energized us, and we rallied. Minutes later, the tent was again quaking with laughter, the stage as bright as a landing strip, and I can note, with not a small amount of pride, that my last lines, the ones I shouted to my sleeping father, the President, were delivered on a fully lit stage, with the complete attention and collaboration of the miners of San Germán and their halogen headlamps. There was no curtain to close, no stage lights to dim, and I stood there for a moment after the play had ended, bathing in the glow, enjoying myself.

Why not?

A few weeks later, I was home again, and for years afterward, when one or another of the productions I was a part of failed, I thought of that night. I was invited on another tour with Diciembre, but it was more out of politeness than anything else. My middle-class life had rendered me unable to handle the rigors of the road. I declined. I'll be leaving soon anyway, I thought, but I never did. Occasionally, I performed with Henry and Patalarga locally, and we remained friendly. Whenever I ran into one of them, at a show, at a bar, on the street, we always embraced, shared a laugh, and spoke fondly of that night in San Germán. I knew that they remembered the performance as well as I did, though they had forgotten other details—my name, for instance. They called me Alejo, without shame or apology. I didn't mind. I liked them both. I had learned from them, and could learn from them still. Of course, invoking San Germán was an invitation to philosophize, but that was precisely the point. I would listen, just as I had on that trip, and watch Patalarga's or Henry's chest swell with pride. You make do. You manage. You take what the audience gives you and return it to them, only better, burnished by love and commitment. They give you light, and you give them truth. Etc. I liked hearing Henry and Patalarga talk, because no one my age ever spoke that way. Not about theatre, not about politics. Not even about love. It made us uncomfortable.

A few years passed, and one day I found myself hopelessly out of work. I'd made too many enemies, taken everything too lightly. My visa had never come, and I could no longer pretend I'd be young forever. My brother called every now and then, but only at my parents' house, and sometimes months would go by without our exchanging a word. I began auditioning for the soap operas I'd sworn I'd never do again: jilted lovers, home-wrecking womanizers. But I didn't get any of these parts. I was going broke. I thought about giving up my rented room and moving home, but the idea was too humiliating. My father, for his part, was relentlessly optimistic. "Your brother will send the visa. You'll go to America. You'll go to California. You'll be in the movies. Write to your brother, remind him," he said, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I don't think even my father believed it anymore. Still, he kept me apprised of the weather where my brother was, as if I needed to know what clothes to pack. "There are forest fires all over California," he said to me one day. "Hundreds of them."

I just stared at him. That night, I

THE NEW YORKER

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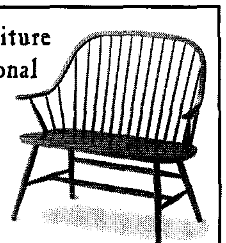

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imagined this place I'd never been, its skies blurred with red-brown smoke, and its sun—which was not our sun—setting against the ashy backdrop of a regional catastrophe. I considered the possibility that what my father wanted was simply to have me out of his way. While I was worried about failing him, perhaps he was simply hoping that I would become someone else's problem.

The following week, I found myself reading the script for a small, recurring role on a local soap opera. It was a six-episode run—not bad—after which my character was to be killed, off-camera. He was a police informer, appropriately troubled by the complicated ethics of betraying his friends, a man who lived in the full expectation that these transgressions would cost him his life. The character's name was, to my great satisfaction, Alejo, and suddenly I felt more confident than I had in months. Though this character and the Alejo I had played with Diciembre were two entirely different people, reading the script felt like running into an old friend. How this country has changed, I thought: the son of the President is now an ordinary snitch, a man doomed to look over his shoulder for six one-hour episodes, and then die invisibly, his passing just a footnote to a larger drama that has little to do with him.

I was so excited that I told my parents about the audition. I told my friends. Alejo, I thought, we meet again. I even thought of tracking down Henry and Patalarga, though I hadn't seen them in a year or more, just so we could all have a laugh about it. By then, Diciembre was on semi-permanent hiatus, and the country had become frankly unrecognizable. It was possible to walk the now bustling streets of my city and forget why I'd ever wanted to leave. Global metal prices were at record highs, and the newspapers were announcing seven-per-cent growth. All this prosperity was dispiriting; it was the one thing I'd never expected. I'd never been back to those towns I had visited with Diciembre, though some of my peers had—on vacation, during the dry season, with their spouses and overweight kids, to see a bit of the country as it once was. At the first sign of discontent, the government ran television ads showing images of provincial roadblocks, angry campesinos tossing stones at police, the screen stained an ominous and familiar shade of red. The stern voice-over warned the rural poor to be patriotic, and not ruin it for the rest of us.

Henry and I met on a winter afternoon at a café in Asylum Downs. It was the day before my audition. He had no phone, no e-mail, and I'd got a message to him through a mutual friend who lived in his neighborhood. He seemed genuinely pleased to see me, and gave me a big hug, clapping my back heartily. We sat at an inside table, protected from the damp. It was great to see him—he hadn't changed at all—but where was Patalarga?

Henry rubbed his eyes, and pushed his heavy curls down with his palms. "Our friend," he said in a helpless voice, "is no longer with us."

I was stunned. I sank into my chair. "When?" I managed to ask.

He looked down into his coffee cup. "Nine months ago, ten."

"Jesus."

"I know," Henry said, but then he was laughing. "The jerk moved to Barcelona. Imagine!"

"You asshole," I muttered.

"It's just you and me, Alejito," Henry said. "Father and son." He held out his hand. "Laugh!" he ordered. "You were always such a serious boy."

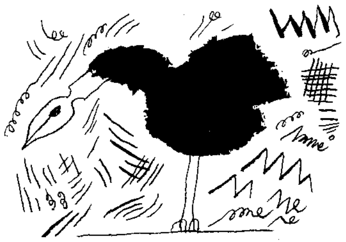
This was a line from "The Idiot President." I took his hand and gave him a weak smile. The shock was draining away—Patalarga was alive, after all, and I should be happy. We sipped our coffee.

In any case, there was other news. Henry had a daughter now, and she had changed his life. He saw her two or three times a week, and dedicated everything he wrote to his little girl.

"So you're writing a lot?" I asked.

Henry shrugged. "Some."

I told him about Alejo the snitch. I even took out the script and talked him through the first episode, where Alejo is caught stealing wiring from a construction site and avoids jail time by offering information on a local street gang. The dialogue was good, nice hardboiled stuff, and I could scarcely contain my enthusiasm. Henry listened carefully, nodding all the while.



"It's glorious," he said. "Written just for you."

"I know," I said. "I really feel like it is."

After a while, Henry said that he had a question, but he didn't want to offend me. He made me promise not to take it the wrong way. "Sure," I said.

He tapped his fingers on the wooden table. "Weren't you supposed to go somewhere?" he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it was all you ever talked about out there." He paused. "Every day, constantly. We figured it was the altitude. We could hardly stand it, Patalarga and I."

"Really?"

Henry nodded.

In my recollection of our two months in the mountains, I had barely ever spoken of leaving. I'd carried the notion with me, of course, but had held this private reassurance very close, like a charm or a lucky coin. Knowing that it would all pass was what had got me through.

"We learned to tune it out," Henry said, "because we liked you. We really did. Still do." He reached across the table and pinched my cheek affectionately. "Son," he added. "So why didn't you leave?"

Outside, a phalanx of pigeons had landed in the avenue's concrete median, swirling like a dust storm around an overturned trash can. I stared at them for a while, admiring their hunger.

"Everything got so good around here," I said.

Henry nodded. "Of course," he said. "That's just what I was thinking."

We said goodbye outside the café, on the busy avenue. Henry wished me good luck, and I promised to let him know how it turned out.

I nailed the audition, and waited optimistically for a callback. I measured the passing of time by the progress of the fires in the distant north. My old man gave me daily updates, and I pretended to listen. Five hundred, a thousand, two thousand fires. After a month, they had burned out, and I was still waiting. ♦

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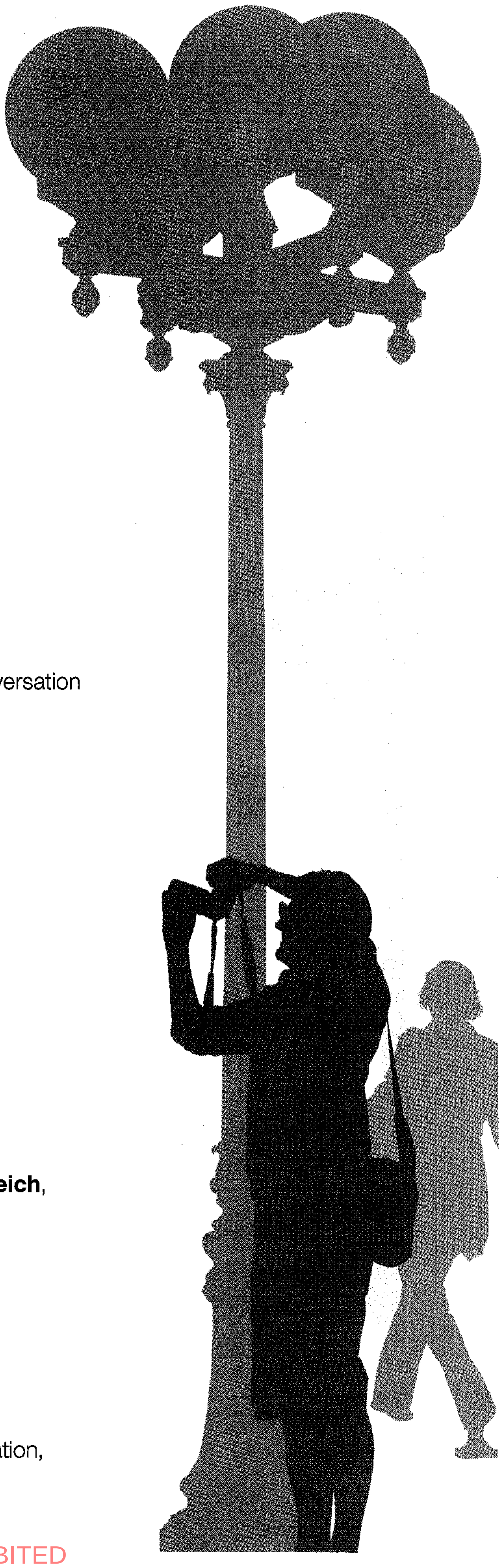


THE CRITICS

MARISCAL

POP MUSIC

THE TIMBALAND ERA

How the most important producer of the decade changed the rules.

BY SASHA FRERE-JONES

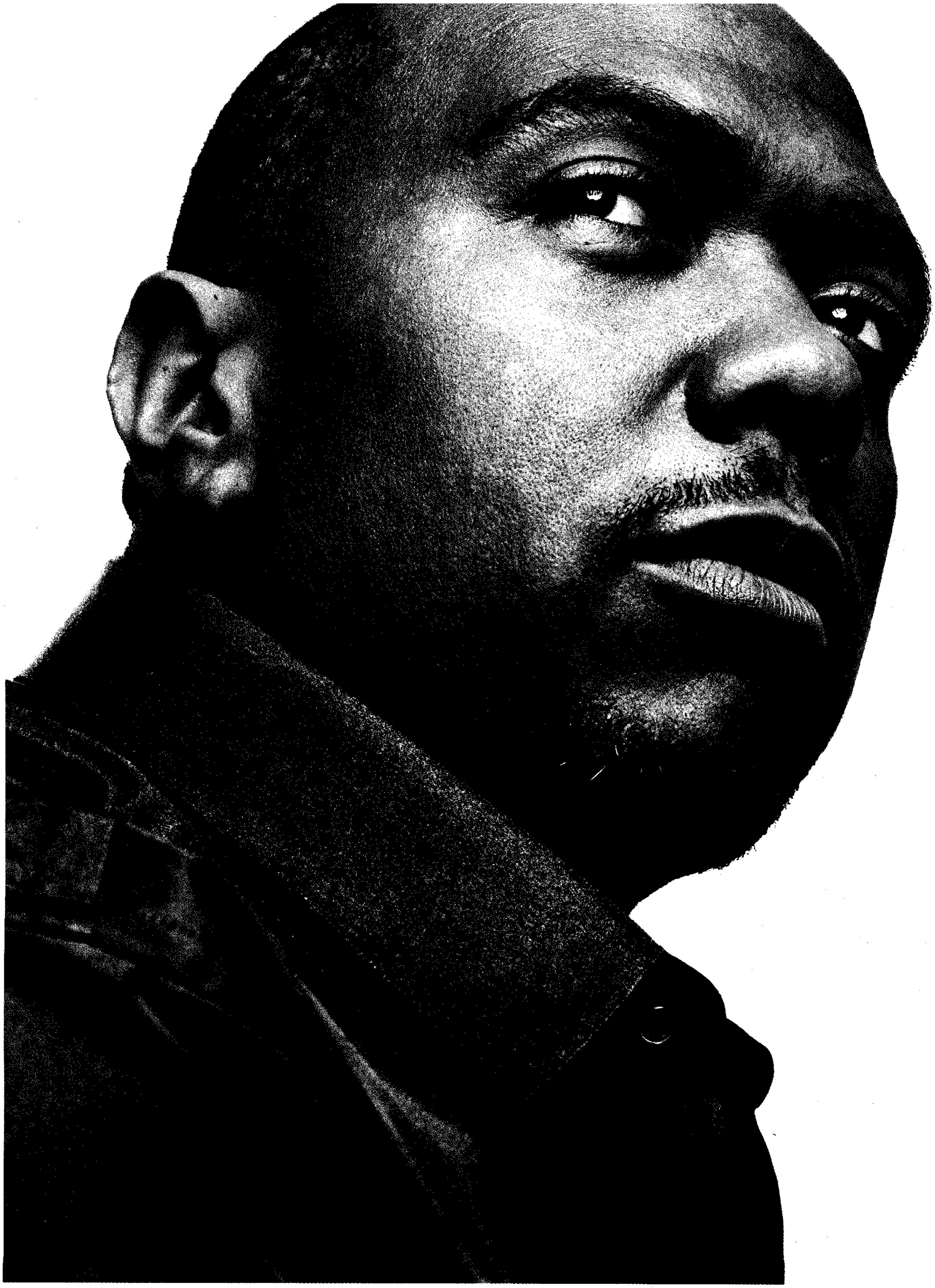
At first, in the late eighties, he was DJ Timmy Tim—a kid named Timothy Mosley, from Virginia Beach, who liked creating beats in his bedroom. Then, in the nineties, he renamed himself Timbaland and began the stretch of work that has made him, against considerable competition, the most important producer of the past decade. A duo called the Neptunes, childhood friends of Mosley's from Virginia Beach, gave Timbaland a run for his money at the beginning of the aughts but have been harder to find in the past few years, when Timbaland scored his two biggest successes, Nelly Furtado's "Loose" and Justin Timberlake's "FutureSex/LoveSounds." The Michael Jordan to Timbaland's Kobe Bryant, Dr. Dre, is the producer who recast hip-hop in the nineties, and whose crisp, high-resolution beats found their way into the larger pop world. Dre has had several sizable hits since 2000—50 Cent's strangely stern but addictive "In Da Club" is at the top of this list—but since 1996, when Mosley showed up on the charts with a young singer named Aaliyah, the sound of pop music has drifted toward Timbaland. When you hear a rhythm that is being played by an instrument you can't identify but wish you owned, when you hear a song that refuses to make up its mind about its genre but compels you to move, or when you hear noises that you thought couldn't find a comfortable place in a pop song, you are hearing Timbaland, or school thereof.

Timbaland started out by changing the beat of R. & B. What had swung before began to stutter and syncopate in ways that felt both ancient and completely new. Listen to the hi-hat in a song like Aaliyah's "One in a Million"—the patterns pause, and come back doubled and tripled, closer to tap dancing than to any dull timekeeping. Then the innovations began to bloom in size and style. Aaliyah's "Are You That Somebody?" is among the most significant singles of the nineties: the beat refuses to fully engage, using more dead space than you would have thought possible in a hit. And it wasn't just because Timbaland performed a cross-rhythm of mouth noises—pops and clicks. (Oh, and there's a baby gurgling.) He was obviously heading somewhere else.

When, in 1997, Mosley produced a song called "The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)," for his old friend Missy Elliott, it was the beginning of one of the most fruitful collaborations in recent memory. (Sadly, many of Elliott's latest singles have not been produced by Timbaland.) Singles like "Get Ur Freak On" and "Work It" didn't seem to operate by any of the rules. Where other producers were starting to rely heavily on vintage synthesizer sounds, Timbaland added tabla drums. When other producers began to copy his chattering hi-hats, Timbaland shrank his beats to almost nothing, as if to prove that he could make a dance-floor hit with the cheapest drum machine he could find. While his peers were still looking for old soul records to sample, Timbaland sampled Björk's "Jóga" for an Elliott remix.

There is a long list of fervid, breathtaking productions from the nineties and the early two thousands, many for rappers and vocalists who barely made it into the public consciousness. (Ms. Jade? Playa?) Rock musicians and pop singers began to cite Timbaland's work as an inspiration, and soon the big-name collaborations started happening, including two tracks on Björk's "Volta." The Furtado and Timberlake albums were enormously popular—after Timbaland had taken almost two years off (as one must), to focus on losing weight and bodybuilding—and he shifted the focus of his productions from rhythm and sound to full-fledged pop, a transition that few hip-hop producers have made. Perhaps it isn't such a shock that these two albums worked—both Furtado and Timberlake are familiar with the sharp turns and swing of the R. & B. genre. Though the albums aren't strictly R. & B., they live at its edges. Furtado's "Promiscuous," the biggest hit that she and Timbaland have made together, is like a playful update of the PG-rated flirting of such eighties dance music as Janet Jackson's "Nasty," with a heavier and darker rhythmic bed. Timberlake's "My Love" is a silvery, weightless marriage proposal, completely digital in sound but so traditional in theme that it encompasses both Boyz II Men—the most successful harmony vocal act of the nineties—and fifties doo-wop romancers like the Moonglows.

This year, Timbaland decided to produce an entire album by an artist with no roots in R. & B. or hip-hop. Chris Cornell is a lithe, goateed musician first known as the singer of the Seattle band Soundgarden, whose members were loud contemporaries of Nirvana and were good at working within the bounds of hard rock established by Black Sabbath and Guns N' Roses and pushing them ever so slightly. (The band's best song, "Black Hole Sun," is one of its least heavy-handed.) Cornell, a belter with a strong, velvety tone, is a cagey, controlled singer; in a genre full of shriekers, he rarely shrieks. Since leaving Soundgarden, Cornell has made several less amped-up rock records, none remarkable, all tasteful. If



Cross-rhythms, pops, clicks, mouth noises, a gurgling baby—you're hearing Timbaland, or school thereof. Photograph by Platon.

THE NEW YORKER, NOV. 12, 1927

"the Sherry idea of service…as far as we could gather, is that everybody is eccentric and possibly slightly cracked, and therefore anything they do is right…we had the feeling that if we were to evince a tendency to stand on our head, two unsurprised butlers would be at our side to help us balance."

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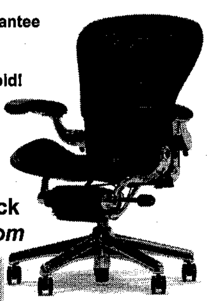
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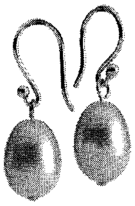
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he has a flaw, it is his sincerity: he sings big and Means What He Sings. He needs a little weirdness and danger to set off his handsome vocals; working with Timbaland seemed, in every way, like a smart move.

So how come so much of their new collaboration, "Scream," is so awkward? (The album is technically a Chris Cornell record, even though Timbaland's production dominates.) Some of the mismatch feels purely formal. Timbaland's métier is the mosaic: points of sound arrayed on digital black. It is literally digital music—sounds that turn on and off, like ones and zeros. (If he's looking for a rock partner, it seems as though a speed-metal act might best fit Timbaland's aesthetic.) Cornell works well against a big, unruly band—waves of guitar noise crusted with overtones, bass lines that resonate so heavily that they blur—but against Timbaland's beats things get confusing.

"Part of Me" is an averaging out of the two styles, though not in any felicitous way. The backing track is bleepy and attractive, the kind of futuristic effect that Timbaland can achieve without thinking. There are some distorted guitars audible, fairly low in the mix. Cornell sounds fine, but the lyrics are like something imported from an R. & B. record by a teen-ager. There is a woman on the scene, a "little girl," and Cornell is "loving the dress she wears," though "not what she's going through." A bit heartless, but maybe that's what happens when our shirtless rock god ends up in the club. Then there's the chorus—"No, that bitch ain't a part of me," over and over. Aside from being icky, it doesn't make the ill fit of the R. & B. syntax any more sensible. Why do we need to hear the word "bitch" again and again? (It's more graceless than offensive.) Then there's a "rock" interlude that seems to have been lifted from a video game about people with swords.

Neither Cornell nor Timbaland sounds much like himself. When I first heard "Scream," several months ago in Florida, Mosley's wife, who is also his publicist, warned me against asking who played on the record. Unpacking the credits for "Scream" might be done best in the company of a lawyer. Here's one line: "All songs written by Chris Cornell." There is, however, an average of 4.77 songwriting credits for each song, and mentions of vocal production by Jim Beanz and instruments by Jerome Harmon. Um. "Songs." O.K.

"Sweet Revenge" gets closer to a happy average. Cornell's voice is strong, straining at its limits, and there is a sweetly multi-tracked bridge that works well against the rhythm, which percolates. The energy is up. But then comes the chorus, which includes a long Auto-Tuned warbling of the words "sweet revenge." The robotic sound, aside from being past its sell-by date, could be anybody singing. "Never Far Away" could be one of the worst songs of the year, a rock ballad with all the bombast of Soundgarden yet with none of the heft or the force. The lyrics are like Bon Jovi with the fun sucked out, and could be moonlighting for an e-greeting-card site: "You are the road that I will travel, you are the words I write. You are the ocean I will swallow, you are the wind I ride." Timbaland rarely puts sounds together in an infelicitous way: so why the swooping synth arpeggios? What we love about Timbaland is that so much of his music evades known templates, but figuring out what is happening on "Scream" is not, in large part, a pleasant hunt.

Thus it is all the more wonderful that there is an unmitigated success on the record. "Ground Zero" ditches all the cinematic foofaraw and imitation rock guitars. It is one of the album's sparest tracks, and it bobs beautifully, anchored by the sound of a live drumbeat that sits exactly between rock and uptempo funk. Cornell restrains himself, nodding slightly toward the blues. "When it all falls down, and the law don't count, and it don't seem fair, and the people don't care—where in the world you gonna go?" A small, nagging sound echoes a guitar without necessarily being one, and Timbaland's signature details and yelps decorate the track without interfering. Stripped of their grandiose tendencies, Cornell and Mosley are a good fit. If they decide to do this again, "Ground Zero" is where they should start. ♦

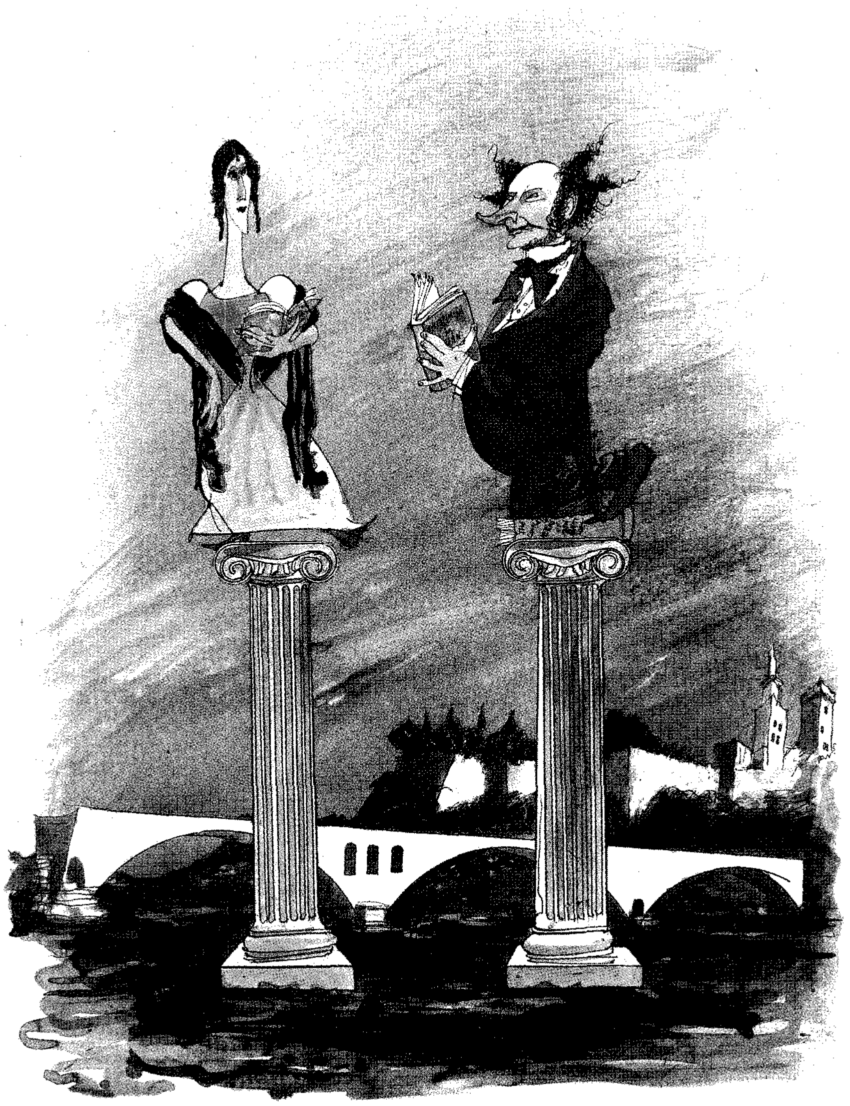
NEWYORKER.COM
Sasha Frere-Jones's pop-music blog.

A CRITIC AT LARGE

RIGHT AGAIN

The passions of John Stuart Mill.

BY ADAM GOPNIK



Mill credited his lover, Harriet Taylor, as the co-creator of his best-known works.

RALPH STEADMAN

It is a hard thing, being right about everything all the time. Nobody likes a know-it-all, and we wait for the moment when the know-it-all is wrong to insist that he never really knew anything in the first place. The know-it-all, far from living in smug superiority, has the burden of being right the next time, too. Certainly no one has ever been so right about so many things so much of the time as John Stuart Mill, the nineteenth-century English philosopher, politician, and know-it-all nonpareil who is the subject of a fine new biography by the British journalist Richard Reeves, "John Stuart Mill: Victorian Firebrand" (Overlook; $40). The book's subtitle, meant to be excitingly commercial, is ill chosen; a firebrand should flame and then die out, while Mill burned for half a century with a steady heat so well regulated that it continues to warm his causes today—"Victorian Low-Simmering Hot Plate" might be closer to it.

Mill believed in complete equality between the sexes, not just women's colleges and, someday, female suffrage but absolute parity; he believed in equal process for all, the end of slavery, votes for the working classes, and the right to birth control (he was arrested at seventeen for helping poor people obtain contraception), and in the common intelligence of all the races of mankind. He led the fight for due process for detainees accused of terrorism; argued for teaching Arabic, in order not to alienate potential native radicals; and opposed adulterating Anglo-American liberalism with too much systematic French theory—all this along with an intelligent acceptance of the free market as an engine of prosperity and a desire to see its excesses and inequalities curbed. He was right about nearly everything, even when contemplating what was wrong: open-minded and magnanimous to a fault, he saw through Thomas Carlyle's reactionary politics to his genius, and his essay on Coleridge, a leading conservative of the previous generation, is a model appreciation of a writer whose views are all wrong but whose writing is still wonderful. Mill was an enemy of religious bigotry and superstition, and a friend of toleration and free thought, without overdoing either. (No one has ever been more eloquent about the ethical virtues of Jesus of Nazareth.)

All of which makes trouble for a biographer. Every time we turn a corner, there is Mill, smiling just a touch too complacently at having got there first. Admiration for intelligence and truth easily turns into resentment at the person who has them; Aristides the Just was banished from Athens because people were fed up with hearing him called Aristides the Just. It is one of the many virtues of Reeves's funny, humane biography that it brings Mill to life in the only way sententious great men can be brought to life, and that is by showing us what he was like when he lost his heart and when he lost his reason. Both happened to him just once, but that was sufficient. Mill's is a story of a man out in the pure sun of reason and rational inquiry, lit at night by the romantic moonlight of a little bit of love and just enough madness.

Mill's boyhood was one of the strangest of the nineteenth century, and is one subject of his own matchless memoir, published posthumously. He was born in 1806 to a driven Scottish writer, James Mill, and a passive and mostly invisible mother. Chosen for an experiment in education, he was crammed with learning by his father and his father's mentor, the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham. The aim was to produce a mind distended out of all proportion—force-fed facts, as unlucky geese are force-fed corn. The foie gras of the boy's mind was then to be dined on by a grateful nation; the boy's life, like the goose's comfort, was secondary. Latin, Greek, ancient history, political economy: "By the age of six," Reeves notes, "young Mill had written a history of Rome; by seven he was reading Plato in Greek; at eight soaking up Sophocles." By twelve, he more or less sat his examinations for university entrance.

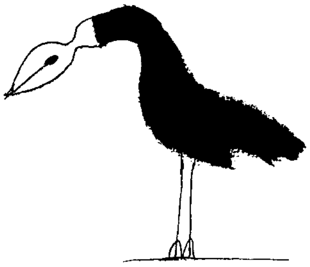
The curriculum had no room for new poetry, and not much for old music. It was nothing but history, math, economics, the classics, and the Benthamite axioms: actions could lead to pleasure or pain, happiness or distress, and the right action was the one that led to the most happiness for the most people. In hard hands, the principle could seem like a mechanical parody of ethics, but it had its points. Bentham's real achievement was to squeeze the piety out of Enlightenment talk of "rights." People didn't have rights because their creator endowed them with rights; they had them because rights were useful to have.

Mill's odd education became one of the nightmares of the nineteenth century; in "Little Men," Louisa May Alcott imagines a child who is so stuffed with learning by an ambitious father that he blows his circuits and becomes permanently feebleminded. But Mill emerged as the prodigy he was meant to be. At the age of seventeen, he became a clerk at the East India Company, the private corporation that then ran India, and remained at its headquarters in London for thirty-five years, administering Indian affairs at a distance—a servant of British imperialism, but a benevolent kind. (When, later, the government tried to cut funds for Indian colonial colleges teaching Arabic and Sanskrit, Mill fought to keep the practice going, for fear of losing all contact with the élites. "Without knowing the language of a people, we never really know their thoughts, their feelings, and their type of character," he wrote.) He was such a demon for work that, growing overheated through feverish memo-writing, he would gradually strip off his clothes and work gravely at his stool without waistcoat or pants, as his colleagues watched in prim Victorian wonder.

More important for his thought, Mill became, before he was twenty, a popular writer out on the radical edge of journalism. He plunged into the new world of professional writing in newspapers and magazines that was as much a part of the early Victorian scene as the booming railroad. He became a leading contributor to, and by far the most effective polemicist for, the *Westminster Review,* which Bentham had started in 1823 as a counterpart to the conservative *Quarterly Review* and *Edinburgh Review.* "Journalism is to modern Europe what political oratory was to Athens and Rome," the young Mill announced grandly. While some of the great minds of the previous century, Samuel Johnson most memorably, had begun as journalists, where the money was, and had been promoted in the popular mind to the dignity of philosophers, Mill began in philosophy, where ideas were found, and chose to write for the magazines and papers, where the fighting was.

Through the eighteen-twenties, Mill attacked David Hume's history (Hume, though philosophically radical, was politically conservative), William Cobbett's sentimental populism, the false idea of "balance" in the British constitution (if a government was indeed perfectly "balanced," then "the machine must stand still"), and discrimination against Catholics. In all of it, he was still following his mentors' ideas, and affecting his mentors' chilly mien. "The description so often given of a Benthamite, as a mere reasoning machine . . . was during two or three years of my life not altogether untrue of me," he confessed much later.

Reasoning machines, as we all know, have a high failure rate; sooner or later, the hard drive just stops spinning. Mill's did, too: in 1826, he was plunged into a black depression. His description in his memoir of his breakdown, which lasted for about two years, is among the best in English: "I sought no comfort by speaking to others of what I felt. If I had loved anyone sufficiently to make confiding my griefs a necessity, I should not have been in the condition I was." Though he was able to continue working, he could no longer write. With his quick intelligence, he recognized that the problem lay somewhere in his formation, in things that had been given too little attention. He turned to music for solace. It helped for a while, until he grew obsessed with the thought that there are only so many notes, and so many combinations of notes, and that, sooner or later, they would be used up, and all melody exhausted.



Poetry saved him. He read the early romantics, Coleridge and Wordsworth in particular, and by the end of the decade was cured, or at least better. He began to see a new light. It couldn't change his affect: he remained a tight, mild, buttoned-down man. But it changed his affections. From that time on, he was as evangelical for the arts as any Ruskinian. ("He was most emphatically a philosopher, but then he read Wordsworth," a disappointed utilitarian friend remarked in 1840.) He toured Italy regularly, making rounds of the churches to see the pictures. He became an aesthete—a dutiful and systematic one, but an aesthete all the same.

His love of poetry and music and art also led him toward conservative thought. Aesthetes always bend to the right, in part because the best music and the best buildings were made in the past, and become an argument for its qualities. Someone entering Chartres becomes, for a moment, a medieval Catholic, and a person looking at Bellini or Titian has to admit that an unequal society can make unequalled pictures. To love old art is to honor old arrangements. But even new and progressive art is, as Mill knew, a product of imagination and inspiration, not of fair dealing and transparent processes; the central concerns of liberalism—fairness, equity, individual rights—really don't enter into it. Mozart, whom Mill loved, would have benefitted as a person had he lived in a world that gave him the right to vote for his congressman, collect an old-age pension, and write letters to the editor on general subjects, and that gave his older sister her chance at composing, too. But not a note of his music would have been any better. Art is a product of eccentric genius, which we can protect, but which no theory of utility can explain.

So when, in 1834, Mill—having been chastened by madness and instructed by art (and having mourned, and been emancipated by, the death of Bentham, two years earlier)—began a new journal, the *London Review*, the contributor he sought most eagerly was no utilitarian but the great Scottish reactionary prose-poet Thomas Carlyle. (The keen friendship between these two utterly unlike men would itself be a good subject for a book.) Mill revered Carlyle's originality of vision and soul, while Carlyle, though he mocked Mill's pensive faith in rational argument, recognized that the younger man had the far more finished and exact mind. The friendship survived even the most scarifying incident in the history of letters, when Mill's housemaid accidentally burned the only manuscript of Carlyle's history of the French Revolution in the kitchen fire. (Carlyle was good-humored about it, perhaps because, like many writers, he really preferred having the project to brood on to the brief melodrama of publication.) Throughout the eighteen-thirties, the give-and-take between Carlyle's deeply pessimistic sense of the primal violence that lay beneath the surface of civilization and Mill's insistence that the cure for the primal illness was more civilization was one of the creative engines of English thought.

Beginning in the late eighteen-twenties, Mill took on a great deal of Continental philosophy that, then as now, was regarded as just this side of charlatanism by his bread-and-butter Anglo-Saxon colleagues. He borrowed the term "self-development" from the German Romantic philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt, and considered that, rather than utilitarian pleasure, to be the end of life. A good life for Mill, post-madness, is not one where you have queued before the slot machine of utility and got the candy it dispenses. It is one where you have gone out into the world to build the best self you can—travelled where you wanted and seen what you could and said what you had to, sung your own songs and heard your own poems. Mill was a romantic and an epicurean in a gray tweed suit, and his mature liberalism is both what a narrow historian means by liberalism—a theory of free conduct justified by its good results—and what the rest of us mean when we say that someone is liberal-minded: open to all the pleasures of life and generous in their enjoyment.

Like every intelligent Englishman of an epicurean cast, he spent as much time as he could in France. Though he was quietly Francophile from early on, his illness and recovery made him declaratively so. He bought a little house in the papal town of Avignon, in the South of France; it became the home of his heart, where, in his later years, he lived and wrote, and where, eventually, he died. He always condescended to the French, as even Francophile Englishmen will: "Whenever anything goes amiss, the habitual impulse of French people is to say, '*Il faut de la patience*'"—One must be patient—"and of English people, 'What a shame.' The people who think it a shame when anything goes wrong—who rush to the conclusion that the evil could and ought to have been prevented, are those who, in the long run, do most to make the world better." The hopes that had been raised and then ruined by the 1848 revolution in France played the same role for Mill's generation that the fall of the Iron Curtain and the rise of Putin have played in our time: inspiring proof that liberalism might win after all, followed by the crushing realization that it was no match for authoritarian, strongman nationalism, which, in France, took the form of the papier-mâché emperor Louis-Napoleon. (The French experience burned Mill badly. It led him, for a while, to propose, in the ideal republic, giving educated voters more votes than uneducated ones—it was a nation of peasants who had voted in Louis-Napoleon.)

Yet France, even after Mill's disappointments with its politics, remained for him the great good place. The humanizing influence of French civilization—"the free and genial atmosphere of Continental life," as he called it—tempered his drier certainties. The mature Mill is a stable thinker but not a

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systematic one. He recognizes the existence of half-truths alongside near-truths, and of "almost so"s right by "yes, nearly"s. "Truth, in the great practical concerns of life, is so much a question of the reconciling and combining of opposites," he once wrote. "Even progress, which ought to superadd, for the most part only substitutes, one partial and incomplete truth for another."

Throughout the thirties and forties in early-Victorian England, no one was more attended to than the radical Mill. We can only envy his public, for he would have been a terrible pundit for our sound-bite age. He isn't an aphorist; his stuff takes space. Mill's sentences sway and ponder with the heavy grace of elephants, and are often about the same size. Defending a philosophy of hedonism, he writes sentences that contain more philosophy than hedonism: "The happiness which they meant was not a life of rapture; but moments of such, in an existence made up of few and transitory pains, many and various pleasures, with a decided predominance of the active over the passive, and having as the foundation of the whole, not to expect more from life than it is capable of bestowing." "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may," in other words, but no rosebuds fall on the page. Whatever the subject, Mill surveys the ground, clears it of underbrush, builds a house of straw to demonstrate what a shoddy house looks like, sets it on fire, and in its place builds a house of brick, which he dares you to knock down. The house of brick is, as Victorian brick houses usually were, lacking in grace and lightness and charm, but it still stands. You don't come away from Mill dazzled, as you do with Ruskin or Carlyle, but you come away with a place to live your life.

Mill had an allergy to dogma, including his own—which makes him an occasional friend to the dogmatist. When someone says that proof of God's existence can be found in Nature, he doesn't say it's bosh. He asks what this would actually entail if it were true, and infers that such a creator would have to be limited, inept, well-meaning, forgetful, and in a daily contest with another power: "A Being of great but limited power . . . who desires, and pays some regard to, the happiness of his creatures, but who seems to have some other motives of action which he cares more for, and who can hardly be supposed to have created the universe for that purpose alone." What natural theology, taken seriously, shows is not the great Watchmaker or the All-Seeing Jove but the absent-minded Landlord, a sort of eternal Lord Emsworth, who, though he helps the young lovers, cares mainly about his pig.

But Mill *really means it:* take the argument for God's existence seriously, and that's where it leads you. That's the key thing about Mill, hustling between London and Avignon, climbing mountains and administering India and surveying churches: he always really means it. When, in the eighteen-sixties, the English-appointed governor of Jamaica punished a native uprising with hideous cruelty—the accused were tortured and many hanged, after trumpery trials—Mill led the fight in England against him, chairing a committee to have him tried not for maladministration but for murder. (A committee formed in defense of the governor included Dickens and Carlyle.) When Mill said that his rights were worthless unless everyone else had them, too, he really meant it. His friendship with Carlyle broke only when the Scotsman's racism became too much for Mill, a passionate abolitionist, to bear.

Of all Mill's causes, his championing of the rights of women is still the most heroic, and its heroism turns out to be rooted in a passionate love for another person. Mill said that he had always been a feminist, but there isn't any doubt that the engine of his feminism was his friend, love, collaborator, and eventual wife, Harriet Taylor. They met at her home, in Finsbury, in the summer of 1830, over dinner among liberal friends. Harriet, a year younger than Mill, was married, to a slow-witted, well-meaning pharmacist named John Taylor; they had two children. She was smart and pretty—"a small head, a swan-like throat, and a complexion like a pearl," the daughter of someone present at the momentous dinner wrote later—and already oppressed by her very unequal marriage. If you see her pictures, and make allowances for the cosmetic conventions of the portraiture of the time, she still looks pretty wonderful: big Natalie Portman eyes and that fine long neck. She and Mill fell for each other quickly, and began working together. Within a year, someone was writing to her to ask, of a new review of Byron, "Did you or Mill do it?"

For the rest of the decade, theirs was a complicated lobster quadrille of love. If the lovers were just a touch less fierce-looking, Mill and Taylor would make as good a Victorian love story as Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett. They were seen everywhere together. Carlyle's wife, Jane, gossiped that "Mrs. Taylor, tho' encumbered with a husband and children, has ogled John Mill so successfully that he was desperately in love." After years of intrigue, the Taylors finally decided on a separation. To test Mill's love, Harriet went to Paris, and invited him to spend six weeks with her there. The interlude was splendid—but then Harriet, with a rather sweet imperiousness, allowed her husband to come to Paris for his own audition. Harriet ultimately decided—with mingled propriety, uncertainty, and something like flirtatiousness—that they could share her, on an alternating schedule, at the Taylor house, her husband entertaining guests with her on some days, and Mill on others. Taylor paid the bills, while Mill stocked the wine cellar. When John and Harriet were pining for each other, they held secret meetings at the London zoo, by the cage of their "old friend Rhino," whose horn—as they perhaps knew, perhaps did not—was an Asian agent of erotic love.

The gossips gossiped all the more. The gawking Carlyle reported that in France they had "eatin' grapes off o' one bunch, like two love-birds." Though in his memoir Mill denied that they had had sex before they were married, there are purring letters that suggest the contrary. "While you can love me as you so sweetly & beautifully shewed in that hour yesterday, I have all I care for or desire," he wrote in one letter. "The influence of that dear little hour has kept me in spirits ever since." An earlier biographer of Mill, Bruce Mazlish, makes the point that Mill's mother was the real missing presence in his life, and that Harriet (as Yoko Ono did for John Lennon) helped fill his need for a woman who was both an intellectual match and thoroughly maternal. The romance in

Mill's life helped turn him from a thinking machine into a feeling mensch; the know-it-all became an anything-for-love.

Harriet's own writing of the eighteen-thirties and forties on the oppression of marriage has the urgency of immediate experience. A smart woman who had been obliged to be someone's idea of a wife, she had been at that table with the dumb little dictator: "The most insignificant of men, the man who can obtain influence or consideration nowhere else, finds one place where he is chief and head. There is one person, often greatly his superior in understanding, who is obliged to consult him, and whom he is not obliged to consult. He is judge, magistrate, ruler, over their joint concerns." Mill and Taylor, in their later writing, most famously in the 1869 "The Subjection of Women," aren't content to show that women would be happier if freer; they go right to the ground and ask what reason we have for thinking that *any* restraint on women's freedom is just. The arguments against women's liberty have to do with what is natural for women to do, or what women are capable of doing, or what some men would be offended by. They take each case and show that its only rationale is our slavery to custom. Women are naturally passive? Go tell Queen Elizabeth. They are happy in their lot? All slaves say as much to the slave master. They are "designed" to have children? No argument from nature can ever alter an argument from ethics: if women want to raise children, excellent; if they don't, there is no natural reason to think they must any more than there is a reason to think that male philosophers should all put down their pens and go out hunting for mammoths.

Mill makes the point again and again that no one can possibly know what women are or are not "naturally" good at, since their opportunities have been so vanishingly small compared with the length of their oppression. Arguing against the notion that women have no talent for the fine arts, Mill makes the shrewd point that in the one liberal art where women *are* encouraged as much as men, acting on the stage, everyone admits that they're just as good or better. In any case, nature has nothing to do with what should be done. In his essay on "Nature," he writes, "Nature cannot be a proper model for us to imitate. Either it is right that we should kill because nature kills; torture because nature tortures; ruin and devastate because nature does the like; or we ought not to consider what nature does, but what it is good to do." Mill's rejection of a natural case isn't that anything goes; it's that nobody can really know what goes until someone goes farther. He doesn't believe in a blank slate on which anything can be inscribed; he believes in the power of the chalk-holding hand to change the sum on the blackboard.

FIRST NATIONAL
BANK & GRILL

On a list of modern words that changed the most lives, those which Harriet and John wrought together in "The Subjection of Women" must rank high. Before it, women were for all intents and purposes chattel; afterward, they would sooner or later have to be made citizens. You could argue against it, try to unmake it, but you couldn't ignore it. The beach was taken, and the cautious odd couple by the rhino's cage had taken it.

John and Harriet's intellectual idyll was long-lived in shadow, short-lived in sunlight. Mr. Taylor died in 1849, and in 1851 John and Harriet were married. But after only seven and a half years Harriet died of one of those sad, unnamed wasting diseases that blighted the period. Mill had a monument—of the same Carrara marble as Michelangelo's David—constructed for her in Avignon, with an inscription that included the lines "Were there but a few hearts and intellects like hers / this earth would already become the hoped-for heaven." That same month, Mill sent off to the publisher the finished manuscript of "On Liberty," dedicating it to the memory of "the friend and wife whose exalted sense of truth and right was my strongest incitement." (Darwin was finishing "On the Origin of Species" that same year, and also saw it published the next; the two books remain the bedrock of the liberal age.)

Reeves rightly calls "On Liberty" "the greatest celebration of the value of human freedom ever written." Mill has a principle of liberty, but far more important is that he starts a practice of liberal thought. The utility principle is installed, as one might install a piece of software, but is employed only fitfully. No shrewd new proof is proposed. It is the negative side of Mill's claim that changes everything. He reverses figure and ground in the argument. When he asks us to think about liberty, he doesn't want us to ask, Can this odd thing people are doing be deduced from some ethical axiom that lets me call it "good," and permits them to go on doing it? He wants us to ask something simpler: Is this practice causing me any real harm? Not potential harm to my feelings, not social harm to my idea of right, not damage to the great precepts of religion or to my stuffy uncle's sense of propriety. Unless the speaker is actually about to cut your throat, you have to let him work his jaw.

And, by really meaning it, this essentially conservative and tradition-loving man showed that all kinds of practices can stand scrutiny and not be damaged, and that the authoritarian position is not the strongest one but merely the most frightened. Nothing is worse for being looked at. No idea is good enough to exist unopposed. Fundamental differences lie even at the heart of religion and must be freely aired. Christianity is not against argument; it is an argument—should one follow the Greek morality of St. Paul (which includes slavery) or the Jewish morality of St. Mark (which implies the Seder)? The usual objection to Mill's argument is that free societies will still differ radically about what they want to be free *for:* my idea of fun is not yours, or Genghis Khan's. Mill knew this—he knew that you couldn't prove that good things were good. But he also knew that questions not decidable by proof were still amenable to argument, and that he would rather have the side of the argument that suggested that health, prosperity, and pleasure were good things than the side that said they weren't.

Mill's theory of freedom does make an unwarranted assumption—that people want a rich life where knowledge increases, new discoveries are made, and new ideas found, where art flourishes and science advances. If you don't want that kind of society, you don't want liberty, in Mill's sense. Part of what makes him as touching as he is great is that it scarcely occurred to him that anyone would not.

It's also true that many things the Victorian Mill couldn't even have imagined being asked to tolerate have come to be tolerated under the sway of the argument he began. The idea that people would demand the freedom to practice sodomy would, I think, have astonished Mill as much as anyone else in his day. (The topic isn't mentioned anywhere in his writings, though Bentham did write a courageous essay against hanging men for it—and then thought better of publishing the piece.) Yet, demanded on Millian grounds—no harm; no foul—the freedom has been granted. In a sense, social conservatives like Rick Santorum are right: there is a slippery slope leading from one banned practice to the next. Give rights to blacks, and the next thing you know you are giving rights to women and sodomites and then the sodomites are renting formal wear and ordering flowers for their weddings. The slippery slope is what Mill called liberty. Every time we slide a little farther down, what we find is not a descent toward Hell but more air, and more people breathing free.

After Harriet's death, Mill entered Parliament, in 1865, as a liberal backbencher, and did about as well as intellectuals usually do there. He was often hooted, and became notorious for having once described the Conservatives as "necessarily the stupidest party." What he meant wasn't that Conservatives were stupid; Disraeli, who was running the Tory Party then, was probably the cleverest man ever to run a political party, and Mill's own influences from the right were immense and varied. He meant that, since true conservatism is a complicated position, demanding a good deal of restraint when action is what seems to be wanted, and a long view of history when an immediate call to arms is about, it tends to break down into tribal nationalism, which is stupidity incarnate. For Mill, intelligence is defined by sufficient detachment from one's own case to consider it as one of many; a child becomes humanly intelligent the moment it realizes that there are other minds just like its own, working in the same way on the material available to them. The tribal nationalist is stupid because he fails to recognize that, given a slight change of location and accident of birth, he would have embraced the position of his adversary. Put him in another's shoes and he would turn them into Army boots as well.

Though Mill's parliamentary career was patchy, he had one great political triumph, just before he got elected to office: he helped to save the American Union. Few Americans learn that the cotton spinners of Lancashire were among the heroes of the Civil War. Out of work and starving, because of the Union blockade of cotton imports from the Confederacy, the workers nevertheless supported the Union out of pure anti-slavery principles. Had England recognized the South, and acted to end the blockade, as nearly happened several times, the Union would have lost, no matter what Grant or Lincoln did. It didn't happen, because the Lancashire workers were so against it; when the great American historian John Jay Chapman listed the English liberals whose words were most responsible for the workers' resistance to slavery, he placed first the name of John Stuart Mill.

There is a non-stupid conservative reproach to Mill. It is that his great success at changing minds has made a world in which there is not much of a role for people like him. Mill and Harriet, to a degree that they could hardly recognize, flourished within a whole set of social assumptions and shared beliefs. Respect for the mind, space for argument, the dispersal of that respect throughout the population, even the existence of a *rentier* class who could spend their time with ideas—all of these things were possible only in a society that was far more hierarchical and élitist than the society they dreamed of and helped to bring about.

You can also fault Mill for not grasping something that a crazy reactionary like his friend Carlyle recognized: the depths of violence and rage and hatred beneath the thin shell of civilization. Mill is like a man who has spent his life on one of those moving walkways you find in airports. He takes the forward movement so much for granted that he never makes it his subject. "Most of the great positive evils of the world are in themselves removable, and will, if human affairs continue to improve, be in the end reduced within narrow limits," he wrote, a little too assuredly. Mill's work, intellectually so thick, is psychologically thin. There is too little room for Rhinos in it—too little room for the irrational drives that he recognized in his own life but could not entirely blend into his philosophy. It is rich in arguments for freedom, but poor in insights into why so few people want freedom when they can have it. Though no one is more free from the taint of twentieth-century totalitarianism—among Mill's London contemporaries, it was Carlyle whom Hitler adored, and Marx whom Stalin fetishized—Mill displayed no prescience about it, either. Enshrined popular reason was his goal; permanent popular rage beyond his ken.

Still, most philosophical projects die with the philosopher. Mill's thought, as his biographer says, is alive right now on every page of the morning paper. When we debate gay marriage, or abortion rights, or due process for the Guantánamo detainees, we're still working out the consequences of his thoughts and his practice.

And then Mill is so fine. In one of his noblest passages, he took on, in his manner—cautious, precise, throat-clearing, and exit-shutting—the lure of immortality, not to say that it couldn't be so but that few would really want it so:

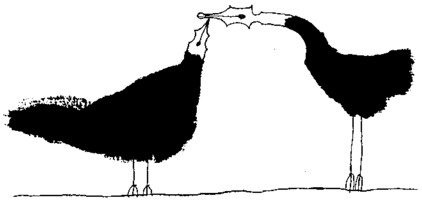
> The mere cessation of existence is no evil to any one: the idea is only formidable through the illusion of imagination which makes one conceive oneself as if one were alive and feeling oneself dead. What is odious in death is not death itself, but the act of dying, and its lugubrious accompaniments: all of which must be equally undergone by the believer in immortality. Nor can I perceive that the skeptic loses by his skepticism any real and valuable consolation except one; the hope of reunion with those dear to him who have ended their earthly life before him. That loss, indeed, is neither to be denied nor extenuated.

When he died, in 1873, worn out by work, writers in the mainstream press in London mocked him for the beliefs that time has shown to be most utterly right. They sneered at his support for women's equality, which had fallen into eclipse in that decade; he must himself have been "feminine" to have supported such a silly thing, and his opposition to slavery had been unrealistically "obstinate." His working-class admirers helped raise a statue to him on the Thames Embankment. But Mill asked to be interred in a remote French town. Five people came to his burial. This was the one place he wanted to be, with Harriet, in the tiny cemetery outside Avignon, where he could rest beside the one love he had had. In the end, it was all he knew. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

The Given Day, *by Dennis Lehane (William Morrow; $27.95).* Lehane, whose previous novels include "Mystic River" and "Gone, Baby, Gone," sets his latest at the end of the First World War, as waves of immigration, uneasy race relations, and agitation over labor issues culminate in a police strike in Boston. Danny, a patrolman and the son of a powerful captain, pursues a pair of anarchists determined to create chaos but also finds himself drawn to the growing police union; Luther, a talented black baseball player, flees to Boston after killing a drug lord in Tulsa. Lehane laces his narrative with melodrama—two brothers in love with the same woman, who harbors a secret past; a viciously racist cop out to destroy Luther and frame the burgeoning N.A.A.C.P.—and a subplot, involving Babe Ruth, feels stale and unnecessary. But he brings vividly to life the struggles that the working classes faced in pursuit of decent working conditions and a fair wage.

The Good Thief, *by Hannah Tinti (Dial; $25).* This striking début novel is an homage to old-fashioned boy's-own adventure stories, and unfolds like a Robert Louis Stevenson tale retold amid the hardscrabble squalor of Colonial New England. The sheer strangeness of the story is beguiling: a one-handed boy, tainted by his upbringing in a Catholic orphanage and with little to offer but a head full of lice, is adopted by a con artist, and enters an underworld of ruthless mousetrap-manufacturing barons, feisty chimney-dwelling dwarves, and, perhaps most terrifying of all, black-market dentists. In keeping with the gothic tradition, Tinti writes with an arch, almost camp sensibility. While on a nocturnal grave-digging excursion to procure bodies for a crazy scientist, for instance, the pair encounter an assassin, who tells the twelve-year-old hero that he was "made for killing." Will the boy ever discover the truth of his past? It's good fun watching him find out.



Bacardi and the Long Fight for Cuba, *by Tom Gjelten (Viking; $27.95).* Facundo Bacardi, who founded the eponymous rum company in 1862, came to Cuba from Spain as a teen-ager. By the turn of the century, as Gjelten lucidly recounts, the distilling operation that Facundo had begun in a shed was among the brands most closely identified with Cuba, and the Bacardis became inextricably entangled with the nation's history. Facundo's eldest son, Emilio, fought to overthrow the Spanish, thus inaugurating the firm's long tradition of promoting revolutionary and progressive politics. But the Bacardis, despite their enthusiastic support for Castro's revolution, were forced into exile in Miami in the nineteen-sixties; benevolent capitalists had no place in the new Cuban paradigm. Today, the family owns a multibillion-dollar global corporation that contributes heavily to the Republican Party.

Unpacking the Boxes, *by Donald Hall (Houghton Mifflin; $24).* Most memoirs begin with a birth, but Hall's starts with another sort of becoming: "At fourteen I decided to spend my life writing poetry, which is what I have done." Soon Hall moves from suburban Connecticut, where "nothing happened," to Exeter, Harvard, and Oxford, his time line marked indelibly by books and illnesses. Hall's direct tone softens the extraordinariness of his life. Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, and Adrienne Rich are school chums; literary successes, such as his appointment as Poet Laureate, are presented without garnish. The final two chapters, which mourn Hall's late wife, Jane Kenyon, and the fact of aging, are more emotionally wrought. Here, where the "fleshy museum of memory" is most acute, Hall affectingly navigates the tumult. In old age, his directness is part modesty and part wryness. When asked, at a Library of Congress dinner, the subject of his writing, he replies, "Love, death, and New Hampshire."

THE THEATRE

GOD IN THE FUN MACHINE

The mystery plays of Sarah Ruhl and Peter Shaffer.

BY JOHN LAHR

In 1997, as the playwright Sarah Ruhl was on her way to see the first work of hers to be produced, she was knocked unconscious in a car accident. Nonetheless, she managed to get to the show—two short plays that now, with the addition of a third, make up "Passion Play" (elegantly directed by Mark Wing-Davey, in a Yale Repertory Theatre production, in New Haven). The event, which was given a standing ovation, proved to be a turning point. "I thought, This is it," she said this year. "It was momentous and strange." More than a decade on, it was stranger still for Ruhl to stand outside Yale's University Theatre and feel that her extraordinary cycle was finally complete.

On its simplest level, "Passion Play"—a meditation on devotion and its appropriation by the state—is a backstage story about the rehearsal and the staging of the medieval mystery plays in Elizabeth I's England, Hitler's Germany, and Reagan's America. In all three parts, the enactment of Christ's sacrifice is played off against the droll hubbub of the actors' selfishness. The medieval Mary (Susan Pourfar), for instance, has a sweet tooth for the decent John the Fisherman (Joaquín Torres), who plays Jesus and is "chaste as a clam," but she gets pregnant by Pontius the Fish-Gutter (Felix Solis); to keep her prestigious role in the pageant, she claims immaculate conception. The balky Bavarian actor who plays Jesus (Torres) in Oberammergau in 1934 wants to leave the play and join the Nazis; he can't remember his lines and at the rehearsal of the Last Supper he is prompted from under the table. Things take an even broader turn at the rehearsal for the Passion in Spearfish, South Dakota: the would-be Jesus (Torres), an aspiring TV actor who takes drama classes at the local college, stops the action at its tragic peak, when Christ says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," and complains to the director, "I don't know if I can do this moment out of context, without the arc of the whole play, you know, to get me there."

Ruhl trades in verbal and visual irony; she uses comedy to draw the audience into her deep speculation about our Christ-haunted civilization. "More and more, it seems to me that the separation between church and state is coming into question in our country," she writes in the program note. "We are a divided nation. And the more divided we are, the less we talk about what divides us." Ruhl wants to offer the audience illumination, not distraction. Her terse scenes are studded with startling nuggets of lyricism, and her writing commands a special kind of imaginative attention: full of clarity, poetry, and mystery without psychology. "Passion Play" steers a course between the illusions of faith and the illusions of reason, travelling from a time when citizens felt protected by the benevolent hand of God to the time when (until last week) they felt protected by the benevolent hand of the free market.

At one point in an earlier draft of the play—in lines that I hope will be restored to the current production—a visiting Englishman at the Oberammergau Passion, who is writing a book about theatre, says with a flourish, "Medieval drama goes in a circle and Aristotelian drama in an arc." The words are a wink at Ruhl's own form of storytelling, which progresses both in a circle and in an arc. Her style is a sort of mesmerizing, symphonic sidewinding. ("Passion Play" is three and a half hours long.) The power of the show is in its cumulative eloquence; themes, symbols, characters, and verbal motifs are rewoven, refracted, and turned back on themselves, transformed before our eyes into a larger discussion that embraces both faith and its bastardization.

"Symbols are nothing but the natural speech of drama," Tennessee Williams said; like him, Ruhl has learned how to make these symbols dynamic onstage. Consider the fish. In "Passion Play," the fish begins as the soiled, smelly center of

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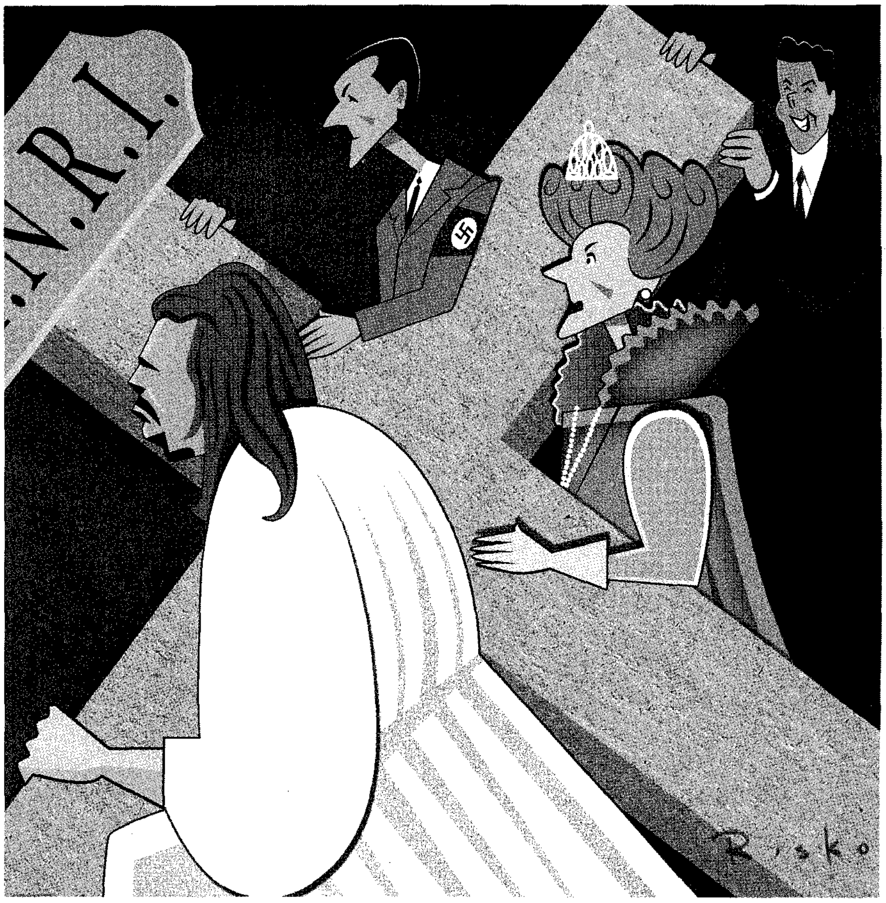
Pontius the Fish-Gutter's humiliated existence. In the American act, which opens in 1969, the fish reappears, as a behemoth blood-spattered body, pulled from the underbrush during a firefight in Vietnam by the actor playing Pilate, or P (Solis); the image plays as the death of faith. At the finale, however, fish return as a symbol of transcendence; P is literally borne up by them, and carried toward a new, unorthodox sense of the sacred. "I think God is a toll-booth worker," he says. "Only he doesn't give exact change. You hand him a dollar, he gives you a fish. Go figure."

Figuring is what Ruhl's play inspires. Her surreal juxtapositions invite the audience to make intellectual connections. In all three acts, heads of state barge into the production (all played by Kathleen Chalfant, who swaggers down the ages with imposing gravitas). Their intrusion makes a sharp point about the difference between medieval and modern notions of identity. Queen Elizabeth I comes to stop the pageant. (In 1559, she banned all religious performances.) As God's representative on earth, the Virgin Queen appropriates Christian iconography to assert her own glory. Hitler, on the other hand, who twice attended the Oberammergau festival, sees the play as a cautionary tale about "the menace of the Jews." "For this reason alone it is vital that the Passion Play be continued," he says, working himself into a rage in a speech taken from historical remarks. President Reagan, on the reëlection trail, before the opening of the Spearfish Passion Play, wraps the Passion, the American body politic, and himself together in a fuzzy fiction. "I give you—a story about a family, a story about those values our heartland holds most dear," he says. "It is morning again in America. We are that city shining on a hill. God bless you and God bless America." By contrast, Ruhl's paradoxical imaginings resist enchantment. "Passion Play" 's verve and daring come from her sure knowledge that, in make-believe, it's not the enchanted but the disenchanted who are free.

Worship is also at the center of Peter Shaffer's 1973 play "Equus" (slickly directed by Thea Sharrock, at the Broadhurst). John Napier's elegant set gives the playing space the feel of an operating theatre—part of the audience is seated above the stage—where Martin Dysart, or Dice Heart (the admirable Richard Griffiths), a sort of psychic detective, solves the problem of Alan Strang (Daniel Radcliffe), a psychotic teen-ager and would-be centaur who gouged out the eyes of six horses with a metal spike at the stable where he works. Ruhl's play is an exhibition of the miraculous; Shaffer's, which could be subtitled "A Stable Named Desire," is a spectacle of the ridiculous. Two hours is all it takes for the good doctor to unpack Alan's unconscious, which should earn Dysart a place in the Guinness Book of Psychiatric Records. "He's ready to abreact," Dysart says at one point in Act II; in fact, the boy has been doing nothing else all evening. In this crowd-pleasing balderdash, Shaffer both trivializes psychiatry and exploits it.

Six beefcake actors with silver horse masks and small hooflike stilts clomp around the stage in equine majesty; these monuments of muscularity are the objects of Alan's desire. He loves to stroke them, hug them, kiss their hooves. To him they are not just "sexy"; they are salvation. So what caused this pony perversion? Was it the parents—a Bible-reading teacher with a whiff of hysteria and an upright atheist printer who is disappointed in his unlettered son? The father turns out to have an appetite for pornography, and he runs into his son—as one does—at a porno theatre, on a first date with a pert stable girl called Jill (Anna Camp). When Alan and Jill, both nude, literally roll in the hay, the eyes of the watching horses are the interruptus to Alan's coitus. The horses pay for their humiliating glances; Alan goes crazy with guilt. Next case, please.



Torres and Chalfant take on the history of faith in "Passion Play."

ROBERT RISKO

The play is written in the most conventional of forms. It's a rational mousetrap into which subsidiary characters rush with little droppings of information and then scuttle off. There is no space for thought, for dreaming, or for joy—just exposition. Still, it is always a pleasure to be in the company of the wry Mr. Griffiths, a big man with a big heart. The world seems to want to know if the diminutive Radcliffe, the centerpiece of the Harry Potter film franchise, will make it into adulthood with his star intact. The answer is yes. What's more, in this time of economic crisis he gives new meaning to the term "naked short." ♦

THE CURRENT CINEMA

EDGE OF DARK

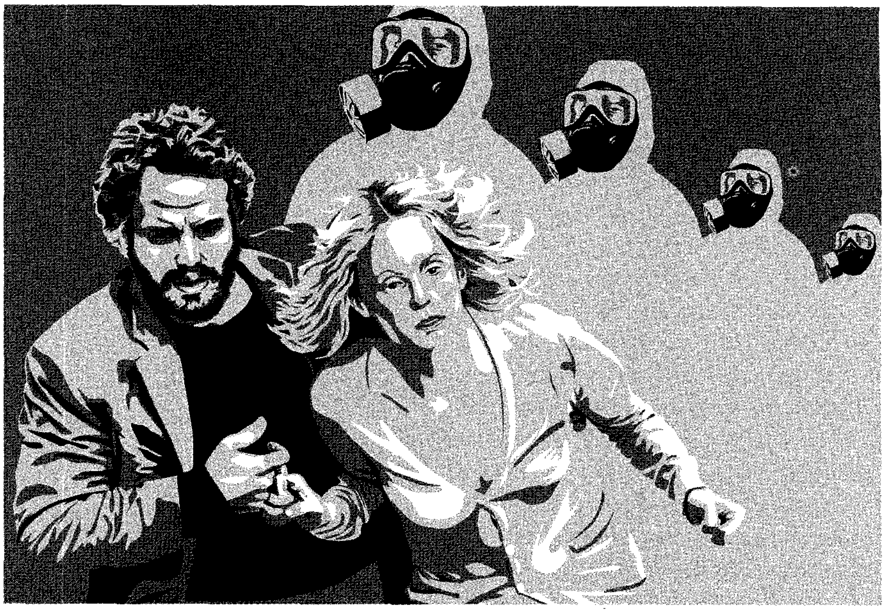
"Blindness" and "Rachel Getting Married."

BY ANTHONY LANE

Things go awry in "Blindness" from the start. In a busy, unnamed city, a traffic light changes to green, but one car fails to move. "I'm blind," the driver, a Japanese guy, cries, pawing at his eyes. In the ensuing melee—and this sets the tone for the rest of the film—what matters is not the plight of the stricken man but the response of those around him. As his sight falters, so his other senses are assailed: horns bray behind him, voices rise in protest, and he whacks his head on the car's doorframe as he tries to get out. Finally, a passerby comes to his aid, takes the wheel, drives him home, and steals the car.

This uncompromising view of our condition comes from Fernando Meirelles, the director of "City of God" (2002) and "The Constant Gardener" (2005), both of which relied on a similar, brilliant bullying. "Blindness" was adapted from the book of the same name by the Portuguese novelist and Nobel laureate José Saramago; the script is by Don McKellar, who also plays the car thief. The movie clings tight to the events of the book, which begin with a plotted briskness but soon unroll into a chain of successive miseries. Thus, the Japanese man (Yusuke Iseya) is taken by his wife (Yoshino Kimura) to an ophthalmologist (Mark Ruffalo), who is baffled by this sudden loss of sight—there is nothing physically wrong with the man's eyes—and says as much, over dinner, to *his* wife (Julianne Moore). By the next day, the doctor, too, is blind. And so it goes on, with marginal characters groping unsteadily to the heart of the action: the doctor's receptionist, for example, plus a kid who was sitting in the waiting room. They have all caught the infection, and yet there is no disease.

The sufferers are rounded up and herded into a quarantine ward, in what looks like a disused hospital or jail, with armed guards preventing their escape. The other wards fill up fast, and flickers of information from the outside suggest that the whole city has gone blind, and perhaps the world beyond. It doesn't take long for the place to fester; soon, there are naked figures, no longer bothering to dress, wandering through corridors littered with filth, human and otherwise. The doctor, who is kindly, efficient, and, frankly, a little boring, tries to maintain order. In the opposing corner, we have a young barman (Gael García Bernal), representing the Hobbesian, or inherently beastly, team. "I hereby declare myself the king of Ward Three," he says, before commandeering the meagre food supplies and agreeing to release them as and when the women offer themselves for rape. We duly reach the pit of this descent: a single file of females, linking hands and lining up to be violated in perpetual night.



Mark Ruffalo and Julianne Moore in a movie by Fernando Meirelles.

DANIEL HERTZBERG

There are many precedents for such horror, in recent history as in art. The greatest of these is "The Parable of the Blind," painted by Bruegel the Elder, in 1568, in which a similar group, each grabbing on to the next, marches in a grim diagonal toward the lower right-hand corner, where one of them has sprawled into a ditch. This is what Jesus foresaw for the scribes and the Pharisees, and the moral caution bristles with rank and smellable detail under the painter's touch, from the begging bowl at one man's waist to the orbless, accusing eyes that another turns on us, in pleading or rebuke. "See, if you can still see, where wickedness will lead you," the look on his face says, and Meirelles is issuing the same challenge with his movie, aiming Bruegel-high. That is why he opens with traffic, choked not merely with pollutants but with the emissions of our haste and rage, and why he closes, two hours later, with the prospect of paradise regained, around a dinner table, and with a hint of sight restored. It was all our fault, and the healing is up to us.

The trouble with "Blindness" is that it's so preoccupied with shouldering this symbolic weight that it gradually forgets to tell a story—to keep faith with the directives of common sense. Julianne Moore, for instance, accompanies her husband into quarantine, even though, inexplicably, she can still see; but why does she keep that gift a secret, instead of crowning herself the good queen of Ward Three? Maybe it's because, like everyone else, she doesn't have a name. That is also true of Saramago's fable; just because namelessness is a commonplace in modern fiction, however (see Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" for its most terrifying use), does not mean that it translates to the screen. Any attempt to blank out movie characters—after all, we know the names of the actors playing them—feels both precious and, in the case of Meirelles's film, counterintuitive. If everyone were struck blind, names would surely become more, not less, crucial: as one means of identification was lost, we would grasp eagerly at another. In these and other ways, "Blindness" feels at once honorably serious and way too pleased with its own soothsaying. You stagger from the dimness of the cinema, beaten down and longing for the light.

The new Jonathan Demme film, "Rachel Getting Married," is mostly set in a rambling house in Connecticut. In terms of entertainment, it's the sort of place that would once have had a piano, a radio, and a pair of parakeets. These days, with a wedding going on, every brand of live music seems to be available: jazz, hip-hop, and samba, with the performers, in their bejewelled bikinis, looking a mite chilly for the time of year. Demme is a genial filmmaker, light on his feet, forever taken aback—even embarrassed—by the way in which his stories drift toward pain. That was true of "Something Wild" and "The Silence of the Lambs," in which terror and black comedy rolled together like dice, and it's there in the mood swings of "Rachel Getting Married"—a minor work, but so menaced by distress that the characters take every opportunity to dance the dark away.

Rachel (Rosemarie DeWitt) is marrying Sidney (Tunde Adebimpe) at the home of her father, Paul (Bill Irwin), and his second wife, Carol (Anna Deavere Smith). Everyone is invited, including Rachel's sister Kym (Anne Hathaway), who is being let out of rehab for the occasion. For a second, you don't realize that it *is* Hathaway, such is the force of her foul mouth and the severity of her cropped hair. Then the famous smile kicks in, though it feels more like a nervous reaction than like a sign of joy. It's a hugely annoying performance, but, I suspect, an accurate one, for Kym is one of nature's annoyers, somehow insuring that every conversation spins around her; where friends and relatives, at the prenuptial supper, hymn the happy couple, Kym prefers to stress her own unhappiness as a drug addict, discussing her twelve-step program and babbling to the verge of free association.

All of this was shot in high-definition video, and it's a close match for the swoop and rush of Kym's speech patterns and behavioral tics—too close, you could argue, luring Demme into a hyperactivity of his own. The film is endlessly sociable, with people crowding the camera as if in a documentary, yet sometimes you want that camera to draw back and watch them from a distance—to see how they mill around in the frame rather than shifting the frame itself. The wedding party is the ultimate guide to Demme's benign vision: the groom is black, the bride is white, she and her bridesmaids are dressed in saris, nobody so much as mentions race, and the officiating priest is played by Demme's cousin, Father Robert Castle, about whom he made a fine film, "Cousin Bobby," in 1992. I don't know if there were any Republican voters involved in this movie, but, if so, it must have been a lonely time. Just imagine if the rest of the crew found out: they would pin you down and sing to you until you changed your mind.

Only once was the music too much for me. This was when Sidney faced his beloved, during the ceremony, and suddenly, instead of reciting lines from the Book of Common Prayer, started chanting Neil Young's "Unknown Legend," unaccompanied, right in her face: "She rides a Harley-Davidson, / Her long brown hair flyin' in the wind." For some reason, Rachel goes ahead and marries him, but it must have been a nasty shock. These passages of hippieish affection are weirdly, if deliberately, out of kilter with the need and anger flyin' around elsewhere. Kym has sex with the best man (another recovering addict), within minutes of her arrival; she borrows her dad's car and trashes it in the woods; she attends the wedding with a black eye. Most upsetting of all is a fight she gets into with her mother, played by Debra Winger. Why don't we see more of Winger these days? She sidles into the fringes of the film, identifies its core concern—Kym's broken bond of trust with her parents, stemming from an incident years before—and nails it with one terrible swing of her fist. She and Hathaway slug it out like cowboys, and for a moment the civilized front of the film is rent from top to bottom. The hopeful, welcoming side of Demme falls away, and we are back with something wild. ♦

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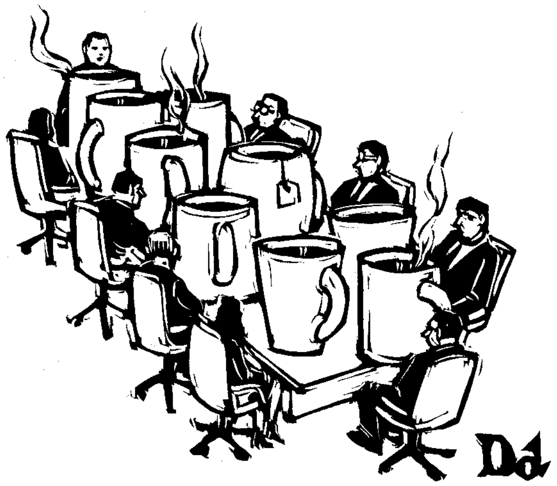
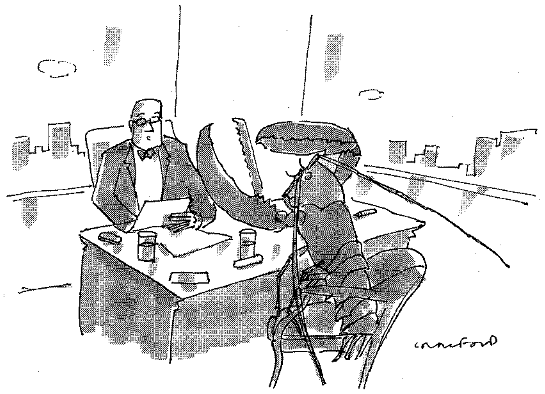
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by P. C. Vey, must be received by Sunday, October 5th. Finalists in the September 22nd contest appear below; go online to vote. We will announce the winner, along with the finalists in this week's contest, in the October 20th issue. The winner will be given a signed print of the cartoon. Any U.S. resident age eighteen or over can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit www.newyorker.com/captioncontest.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"By a 9–0 vote, the rest-room expansion project is approved."
Jon Thompson, Sedona, Ariz.



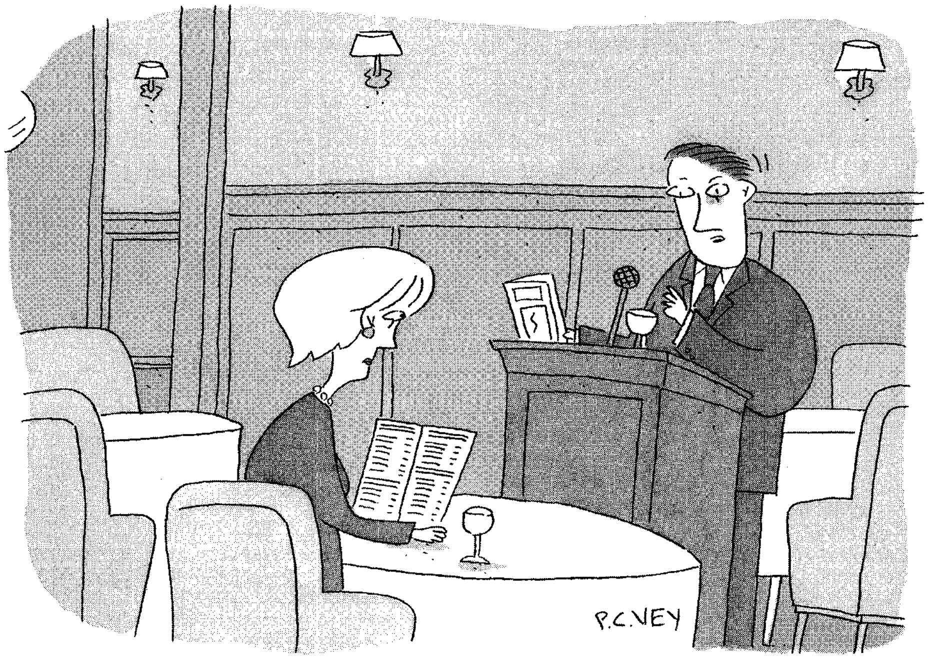
THE FINALISTS

"So why did you leave Red Lobster?"
Paul Vogel, Arlington, Va.

"I guess we have a deal, but we don't have to shake on it."
Candace Klomann, Tucson, Ariz.

"So you think you're ready for the corner tank?"
Meghan Dowd, Somerville, Mass.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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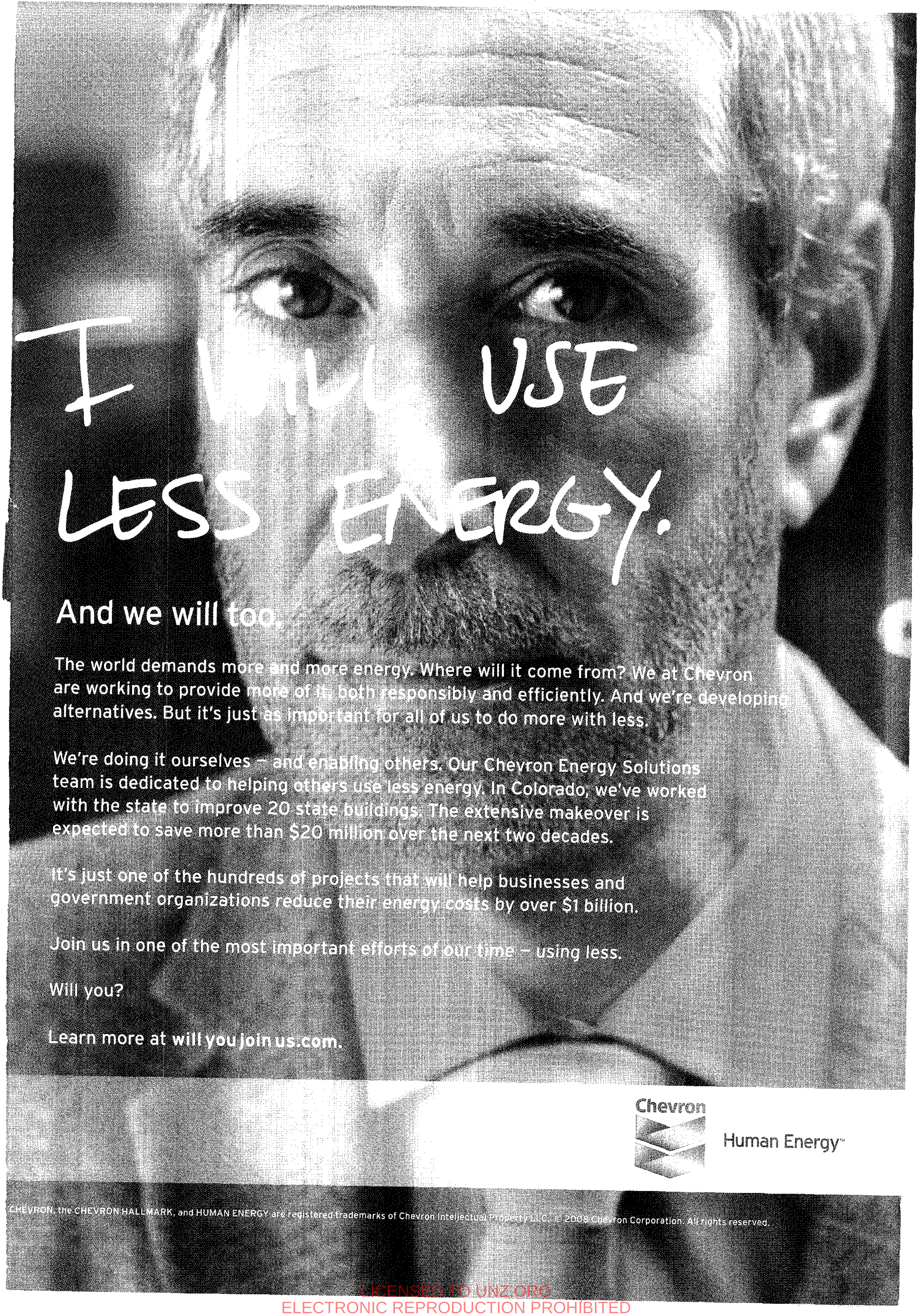

And we will too.

The world demands more and more energy. Where will it come from? We at Chevron are working to provide more of it, both responsibly and efficiently. And we're developing alternatives. But it's just as important for all of us to do more with less.

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9

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2008 MERCEDES-BENZ C-CLASS	18 MPG
2008 BMW X3	17 MPG
2009 VOLVO XC90	14 MPG

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